

# Group development in the physical education class

Johan Hovelynck  
Yves Vanden Auweele

*A classroom is like all other classrooms.  
A classroom is like some other classrooms.  
A classroom is like no other classroom.*

D. Lancy

Every class and every student is different, but as a teacher you also encounter moments you recognize from earlier teaching experiences. No matter how different your groups and students are, their interactions seem to follow a number of patterns that are recognizable in virtually every group -- if you're aware of it.

Because we believe that your awareness of these patterns of interaction and their evolution can help you, as a physical education teacher, to manage your class-group and to reach the curriculum goals of the physical education class, this chapter presents a model of group development, and some guidelines for practice that follow from them.

Curriculum goals for the physical education class include both physical and socio-emotional growth, and these goals are interrelated. Both are served by facilitating group development.

The physical education task, on one hand, will benefit from relational issues being settled to

some degree. As relationships require less attention, more energy is available for *physical* education: improving fitness and developing skills.

On the other hand, the relation is an end in itself, in that the class group is an experience in social interaction that influences students' life skills (Weinstein, 1991; Gallagher, 1994). A class that develops to a group characterized by mutual support and trust contains opportunities for constructive peer feedback, and feelings of being accepted. The positive relationships that may grow in class groups seem to play an important role in developing social resilience in adult life, whereas poor

school relationships seem to lead to social vulnerability (Vettenburg, 1988).

Along with a number of other authors we conclude that attending to the group's development is an integral part of teaching. Too often classroom management is approached as if it comes *on top* of the teaching job. Our data suggest that both are tightly integrated in the teacher's task: teaching and classroom management imply each other (Verhaeghe, 1994).

Since a good understanding of models of group development takes some knowledge of the context they were constructed in, the chapter first sheds some light on the origins of contemporary group dynamics, and introduces the basic concepts in this tradition.

The model of group development draws on these concepts. It describes an evolution of group life in terms of four related levels: what the group is talking about or its *topic*, what the group members are privately dealing with or the group's *issue*, the group's internal structure, and its relation to its leader.

In a second part, we derive some guidelines for supporting and directing group development in your class. We first propose an approach to identifying developmental stages. This will allow you to situate your class-group in its development. We conclude with a number of suggestions on how to support its further growth.

# 1. The study of group dynamics: some theoretical background

## 1.1. Some history and characteristics of the group dynamics field:

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### The field and its origins

Group dynamics is the study of people's **behavior in small groups**. Its origins are commonly situated in the practices of Kurt Lewin and the Research Center for Group Dynamics, in the United States, and Wilfred Bion, at the Tavistock Institute in Great Britain, immediately after the second World War.

Kurt Lewin's first studies on groups started in the 1930's. After his experiences in the first World War, he gradually left his experiments in psychology labs in favor of the study of more complex, real life phenomena. In doing so Lewin became interested in groups, which he considered to strongly influence individuals' behavior. As a consequence, he believed in the possibilities of using groups as a medium for dealing with larger scale societal problems, such as the re-education of war torn populations, or improving interracial relations. In this perspective, Lewin, and his colleagues Leland Bradford, Ronald Lippitt and Kenneth Benne started training group facilitators.

Wilfred Bion's work with the Tavistock groups represents a second major input to the field. In contrast with Kurt Lewin, who is usually presented as a Gestalt psychologist, Bion was a psychoanalyst, in charge of a rehabilitation unit of psychiatric patients. Bion interpreted their dysfunctions to be relational inabilities, and therefore worked with his patients in interactive groups. He also worked with the hospital staff, since they represent the patients' immediate social environment. Later on, Bion ran training groups for group therapists.

The training groups of Lewin, Bion and their colleagues lay the foundations for a new approach to working with groups, that is commonly presented as the origins of group dynamics.

### Some characteristics of contemporary group dynamics

Our purpose in presenting some of the early history of group dynamics is that it helps bring to light a few key characteristics of the field, also relevant for this chapter.

First, the study of group dynamics has always had a practical emphasis. Bion's concern was therapy. Lewin's goal was social change. He and his colleagues weren't merely researchers, they were *change agents*. They studied their **groups in the practice of working with them**. The group therapists and organizational development consultants, whose approaches have their roots in Lewin's training groups and who contributed considerably to group dynamic theory, did so too. Their position is rather similar to a teacher's in this respect: they work with groups to achieve an educative goal, part of which is socio-emotional. They help develop the group they observe, and study the group they change.

Second, the distinction between **a task level and a socio-emotional level in group functioning** has played a major role ever since the early beginnings of group dynamic models. Bion's theory makes a distinction between a group's *work*, or task, and the *basic assumption* underlying the group's functioning. A basic assumption is an emotional undercurrent that influences the way the group tackles its task: it is an assumption on which its behavior seems to be based. A class can assume, for example, that its teacher should solve all its problems. The students will *therefore* behave very dependently:

they'll ask their teacher to deal with the tiniest little inconvenience, rather than managing the situation themselves.

In identifying and studying basic assumptions, and not focussing on the group's work in great depth, Bion sets the tone for the group dynamics field: we are mainly concerned with the socio-emotional aspect, and the fit between the socio-emotional and the task level. Not because we aren't interested in the work being done, but because the basic assumptions play an important role in whether the task gets accomplished or not (Rioch, 1975).

### **Summary**

From a group dynamics point of view, a class -- technically speaking -- is a 'small group' because of the interdependence and the face-to-face interaction of the students in it. Our main goal in this field is a better understanding of the personal and relational aspects of the interaction, that may support or interfere with accomplishing the group's task.

### **Groups in group dynamics**

In Lewin's view **interdependency** -- and the group members' awareness of it -- is the basis for a group. The difference between a collection of individuals and a group, in other words, is not related to how similar the individuals are, or how physically close, but to the degree they mutually depend on each other's actions.

In some definitions a group only exists if the members have **a common goal**. According to others, a common goal isn't a necessary condition: interdependence can also result from the necessity to share the means to individual goals. The common goal then defines the difference between a *group* and a *team*. Applying this to physical education classes, this means that a volleyball game involves two *teams* competing with each other: the team members' common goal is to make the ball touch the ground in the other team's field. In circuit training, however, students merely share the equipment for individual work out. We'll therefore refer to them as *groups* instead of teams.

Traditionally, group dynamics deals with 'small groups', meaning that the group's size allows **face-to-face contact** between members. Classes therefore are considered small groups -- despite the increasing numbers of students per class.

## 1.2. Describing the interaction in small groups

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### Dimensions for interaction analysis

In their attempts to describe the socio-emotional aspects of group functioning, group dynamics models have interpreted their data in terms of several categories. Some of these seem more basic, in that they reoccur in different models.

Authors such as Robert Bales, Timothy Leary and Paul Hare (Leary, 1957; Bales, 1970; Hare, 1973) have attempted to identify the smallest number of dimensions needed to explain most of the variation in interpersonal behavior. These dimensions represent aspects of the interaction that seem useful for understanding group phenomena, and are presented as bipolar dimensions. The idea is that positioning group members on each of these dimensions presents you with an accurate view of the group's functioning (Hare, 1973).

The most salient dimensions, regularly returning in the relevant literature, are elaborated below.

The **in-out** dimension describes people as part of the group, or not (Schutz, 1966; Bales, 1970). Other words referring to the same idea are *group membership*, or *inclusion*. Students may well sit in the classroom, but not be part of the class as a social environment. They're out: they were rejected, or they rejected the class themselves.

The **up-down** dimension, describes group members in terms of the influence they exert (Leary, 1957; Schutz, 1966; Bales, 1970): are they dominant, and leading, or subordinate, and following? Are they top-dogs or under-dogs, haves or have-nots?

The **close-far** dimension refers to how tight the link between group members is (Schutz, 1966). Who do they address themselves to, who do they answer to, who do they hang out with, or who do they help? The close-far dimension is sometimes confused with the **with-against** dimension, which does not refer to who group members relate to, but to the quality of that rela-

tion (Leary, 1957; Bales, 1970; Cuvelier, 1980). Is it a relation of agreement, support, and fun, or is their interaction characterized by critique, sarcasm, anger, argument, competition? Group members can be very close, in an destructive way!

The last basic dimension is **forward-backward** (Bales, 1970). Group members can help the group to move on, or slow it down: they can play a stimulating role, or a stagnating one. What 'moving on' then stands for, will become clearer when we describe the stages of group development.

Most teachers have an intuitive understanding of the 5 dimensions described above. One example of this we found in the report of an experienced physical education teacher, who described how he usually tries to get a sense for who is who in a new class. He tells how he watches the group walk in to the gym hall and change their clothes the first day, and mainly assesses who are the 'ringleaders'. In terms of our dimensions this means he starts by positioning some students on the up-down continuum. While doing this he decides whether to initially encourage, neglect, or discourage their informal leadership. This decision is based on a spontaneous positioning of these 'up'-students on the forward-backward dimension.

His approach – or parts of it – can be recognized in the reports of other teachers, or trainers and coaches in team sports.

It is important to realize these dimensions intend to be descriptive, not evaluative: neither pole of it is 'good' or 'bad'. The risk of confusion seems especially real for the with-against dimension, by some authors referred to as positive-negative. The labels merely describe a relationship as characterized by agreement or disagreement, by support or by conflict: they don't assume that conflict is bad.

### Interaction patterns

If these dimensions are to help with describing group interaction, the next thing we need to do is decide which **relationships** we want to talk about. In group dynamics,

the interaction studied typically centers around the relations among group members, the relation to the leader, the relation to the task, the organization, and to other groups. The emphasis is on relationships *within* the group, and that focus is reflected in this chapter: it is primarily on the relationships among students and between the students and their teacher.

One of the common ways to get an overview on these relations, is a **sociogram**: a map in which these relations are drawn with respect to the basic dimensions. The map represents the group members, mostly the leader, sometimes the task, and occasionally elements in the group's environment such as other groups, the organization, etcetera. Their positions and the relations between them are symbolized, for example, by the size of marks, the distance between them, the thickness of lines between them, + or - next to these lines, etcetera.

**Legend to the sociogram:**

Group: symbolized by the large oval  
 Students: represented by a circle with a name next to it - teachers aren't included, only students.

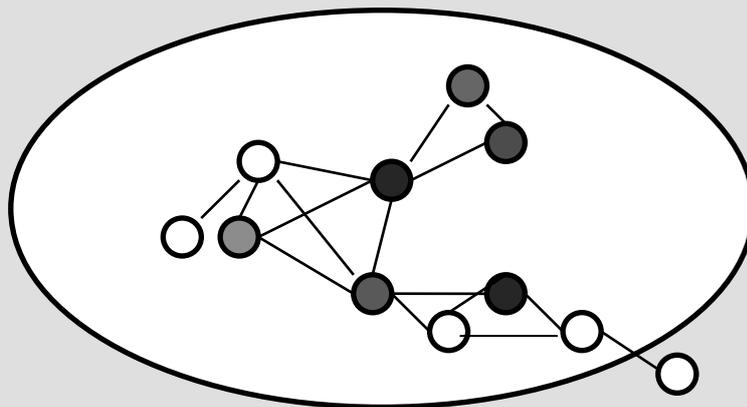
Relationships: symbolized by lines between the circles

In-out: symbolized by the place of the circle, inside or outside the oval  
 Up-down: symbolized by the size of the circle

Close-far: symbolized by the distance between the circles

With-against: + or - signs next to the lines

*Sociogram:*



Depending on which dimensions and which relationships are included, and how they are symbolized, sociograms take a variety of forms larger than this chapter can describe. But they seem to at least have one thing in common: if you regularly draw them, **patterns** emerge. The group shows itself as an evolving network of interconnected relationships.

The group's informal structure that is depicted by such sociograms has an importance in itself, regardless of the group members' characteristics. William Hug and James King pointed out that the attributes of the individual students are far less determining in the friendliness or hostility, apathy or participation of a class, than its patterns of relationships (Hug & King, 1984). From this perspective one can understand the experience among teachers that some of the aggressive, rude students in the classroom turn out to be nice and responsible young people in private conversations: they are now part of a different relational network. Along the same lines, Richard and Patricia Schmuck conclude that these informal interaction patterns determine the class's interpersonal *climate* (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

### The topic and the issue:

A last aspect of interaction we want to introduce before describing group development is the distinction between between **a group's topic and its issue**. The topic is what the group members talk about, what they explicitly address. The issue is their underlying concern: it's the students' preoccupation.

Depending on the class climate the topic and the issue may or may not coincide: students may directly express their concerns, but very often they don't. The issue then remains implicit. If, for example, two of the students in your class have a major argument about the way their team should play basketball, the topic may be dribbling or passing while the issue is being included or left out of the game. Or the topic

may be a player's position on the basketball court, while the issue may be influence and leadership: what's at stake really is not the player's position, but the power to decide on players' positions.

It is a lot easier to discuss dribbling and passing than to share feelings of being left out, and discussing player's positions is a lot more acceptable than claiming leadership. The group members talk about the topic, because they *can* talk about it. It is *available* as a topic. This is not necessarily the case for the issue, so group members silently deal with their issue through talking about their topic, up to the point where the group feels safe enough to talk about the issue after all.

You will notice that the issue in both basketball examples can be formulated in terms of the 5 basic dimensions described earlier: in the dribble-or-pass discussion the issue concerned the in-out dimension, and in the position-on-the-court conflict the issue involved the up-down dimension.

## 1.3. Group development

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### A model of group development

Models of group development typically look at a number of the *basic dimensions* and the *relationships* summarized above, and describe their evolution in a sequence of stages. Some models focus on what we called the group's *issue*, others emphasize the group's *topic*, and still others attempt to integrate both.

The model in this chapter includes both the issue and the topic in the relationships among students in the class, looks at the shift in the patterns as you can see them in a sociogram, and pays attention to the issue underlying the class's relation to the teacher.

With regard to the **evolution of the issue** our model leans mostly on the basic dimensions *in-out*, *up-down*, and *close-far* – a development first presented by William

Schutz, later elaborated by other authors (Schutz, 1966; Neilsen, 1977; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

Our description of the **evolution of the topic** calls on the distinction between *the task* and *socio-emotional aspects* of group functioning: initially the task is the only available topic, but as the students get to know each other it becomes possible to address more emotional and relational matters.

The sociograms we've drawn throughout a group's development reflect **interaction patterns** that evolve from a pool of individuals to an increasingly inclusive group. Finally, the **relation to the teacher** is understood in terms of the basic dimensions *in-out*, *up-down*, *close-far* and *with-against*.

### Summary

In our attempt to understand the socio-emotional aspects of the interaction in the class, we defined 5 relational dimensions: in-out, up-down, close-far, with-against and forward-backward. We can map the students' positions in the class along these dimensions in a sociogram. If we do, patterns emerge. The interpersonal climate in the classroom is related to those patterns. Finally we drew attention to the distinction between a group's topic and its issue, and the observation that the topic of conversation doesn't necessarily coincide with the underlying issue.

We will first give an overview of development in groups: in the story of an evolving basketball team, we'll indicate the trends we typically observe in groups, and summarize them in 5 stages.

In the second part of this chapter, we'll propose a practical approach to how you can situate your class in its development and a number of ideas on how you can facilitate the group's further evolution.

### Stage 1: task, inclusion and dependency

Let's give our theory some body by looking at a number of young people who get together to play basketball during their time off. They divide into 2 teams and we'll follow one of them. Since the new team mates don't really know each other they'll focus on basketball: it's the common interest, and a safe topic.

Basketball thus defines the single criterion for being a good team and being a good team member: to gain full membership of the team one needs to contribute to winning the game, and the most obvious way to do so is scoring. The result of the members' wish to be included in the group therefore is a general rush to the goal: group members work simultaneously, rather than together. There's a lot of running around, and a lot of chaos.

In such a beginning team the only person with the authority to address the way the team plays would be a coach: he or she can impose a zone defence or a defence man-to-man, and assign positions to different players or even decide to take a player out of the game. The player concerned may sigh in disappointment, but typically won't oppose the coach's position.

### Stage 1

- *Topic: the task, and other topics that allow superficial conversation*
- *Issue: in-out: inclusion: being part included or excluded from the class group*
- *Sociogram: a pool of individuals: relationships remain superficial, and consequentially aren't clearly 'with' or 'against'*
- *Relation to the leader: dependency: the teacher is 'up' and 'far': acceptance of instructions and evaluation of performance*

## Stage 2: rules, similarity and counter-dependence

While a coach can help organize a beginning team, the basketball game in the playground doesn't have a coach: the answer to the chaos requires the group's topic to expand from 'the goals' to 'the game'. Players start to address the way they play together by organizing the team's efforts: they typically agree to play man defence, because this structure allows them to apply the same rule to all the team's players, whereas zone defense would force them to assign different roles. In organized basketball the coach can expect the first resistance to his or her decisions: team members start to develop an opinion of their own and may confront their coach with it. The player who sighed in disappointment in an earlier stage may now react with an angry "why me?" Other group members may join the protest if they feel all of the group members aren't treated equally: favoritism is likely to be critiqued heavily.

### **Stage 2**

- *Topic: structure and rules needed to accomplish the task*
- *Issue: equality/similarity: similar others are included and supported; students are extra sensitive to the uniform application of rules to everyone*
- *Sociogram: dyads of students who feel alike in some respect*
- *Relation to the leader: shift toward counterdependency: the teacher remains 'far' and (less high) 'up', and the relationship shifts to 'against'*

## Stage 3: roles, influence and interdependency

In the long run organizing the game involves different roles. Even if the group choose to play man defence they'll come to a point where one team member is better suited to follow a particular opponent than another one, so the topic shifts from an anonymous "how do we play?" to "who does what?" The group agrees that one of the players should remain in the back to stop counter attacks, and eventually defines a playmaker, forwards and guards. This may take a lot of negotiation, and throughout the process different players establish their influence: group leaders emerge, and as the team develops its own leadership they become less dependent on the leadership of their coach.

### **Stage 3**

- *Topic: roles needed to organize for task achievement*
- *Issue: up-down: influence: conflict over roles and power in the class*
- *Sociogram: subgroups, conflicting cliques*
- *Relation to the leader: beginning interdependency: the teacher comes back to 'with', comes closer, and 'in': the relation becomes more cooperative*

Stage 4: behavior, equivalence and continuing interdependency

As the team members get to know each other increasingly well it becomes possible to address the way someone plays his or her role in the game. The leader is likely to be the first one to get feedback on the way he or she is doing, because the leader's functioning has most impact on the group's performance and experience. Others will follow. If the reactions to feedback are positive and the team members feel that they are equally valued despite their unequal roles the group will further develop.

#### **Stage 4**

- *Topic: includes individual behavior in the class as a topic in the group (as opposed to a topic for gossip in a dyad)*
- *Issue: equivalence: mutual acceptance of interpersonal differences*
- *Sociogram: spread effect from the subgroups toward the entire group*
- *Relation to the leader: continuing interdependency*

Stage 5: emotion, openness and continuing interdependency

At this stage members feel accepted as individuals and are therefore able to focus on the group and its task. Concern with the task at this point is very different from the rush to the goal we saw in the beginning group: the players are now genuinely oriented towards the team's goal, whereas before they were driven by the need to prove themselves by scoring. They now call on each others' individual capacities, and benefit from the complementarity in

the group. Whereas the first stage showed energy, we now see 'synergy'.

#### **Stage 5**

- *Topic: includes feelings about the class and achievement, and the relationships among class members: the issue is available as a topic*
- *Issue: close-far: cohesion combined with respect for individual differences*
- *Sociogram: one group: one tightly interwoven network*
- *Relation to the leader: continuing interdependency*

#### **Caveats to the theory**

Before describing some guidelines for practice, it seems appropriate to point at some features of the context in which the above model was developed in, that may affect its significance for practice in different classrooms.

First of all, models of group development are mainly based on the observation of groups of late adolescents and adults, but stages in group development obviously interact with **stages of personal development**. Take counterdependency as an example: this may be a lot nastier in a group of teenagers, who are in a counterdependent age in the first place, than counterdependency in a class of 10 and 11-year olds. It is as if one added the group's puberty to the group members' - so to speak. The same thing goes for the phase of interdependency and 'treating the teacher as another group member': this obviously takes different forms in pre-school than in high school... The devel-

opmental psychology perspective is not explicitly included in this chapter.

Secondly, the evolution in our model starts with a **beginning group**, and the model suggest a rather linear development. The reality is more complex. On the one hand, the only moments teachers deal with truly new groups are probably the beginning of preschool, the first year at primary school and the start of high school: new classmates, a new school, a different schedule, unknown teachers... On the other hand, a group with a few new members, or even an existing group in a new situation is a beginning group too: members need to get acquainted with each other in this new context, that may require new norms, other roles, and different behavior. Therefore groups have multiple starts, and as a consequence their **evolution seems cyclical rather than linear**: they'll revisit earlier issues using similar topics again. And they may do that over and over.

Finally, and because of the two remarks made before, groups may never get to the point where the issue becomes available as a topic. As a matter of fact a whole lot of groups never do, and there's no reason to conclude they would be 'bad' groups... Rather than a weakness of the group, it is a caveat to the theory. As Eric Neilsen points out: **complete group development** is never achieved (Neilsen, 1977).

## 2. Managing your group throughout its development: guidelines for practice

### 2.1. Theory and practice

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Everyone who has set the step from *theory* about education to educational *practice*, has the experience of adjusting both theory and practice to each other: merely trying to apply others' knowledge to your classroom, seems a recipe for failure. That is why, rather than presenting a theory to *apply*, our chapter aims at adding a *perspective* to your view on the classroom. How that perspective translates itself in practice seems too *context* bound, really, for a textbook to formulate detailed advice: it will need to happen in the class...

We'll propose an approach to **situating your class in its development** as a group. This requires matching your observations in the class to the sequence of typical group characteristics presented in the first part. With the sociogram as a tool to support this effort, the emphasis is on listening to relational messages: hearing the topic and trying to understand the issue..

We'll conclude with formulating some ideas for **facilitating group development**. This mainly means helping the group to deal with its issues. While it may sometimes help to simply address the issue, the group won't necessarily be ready to talk about it. That is why this part also explores how tasks, task-structure, rules and class climate can help the group resolve its issues.

### 2.2. Identifying a group's developmental stage

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This part of the chapter presents an approach to identifying a group's developmental stage. It includes an approach to listening for issues and the use of sociograms as an additional tool for under-

standing the issue in its context of group development.

#### Listening to relational messages

Imagine a student who doesn't excel in sciences or languages, but is among the fittest of the class. One day the class works in subgroups of about 6 students taking turns on the single bar and helping each other. Unlike usual our student seems to sabotage the class, however: he looks disconnected, doesn't take his turn, reacts aggressively when others try to get him involved, and doesn't stop swearing about the gymnastics exercises that are scheduled.

Listening to relational messages means: getting beyond the discussion about gymnastics. This assumes that the student's discontentment isn't really about the exercises. It assumes that the exercises are just a topic, a *vehicle* available to express something else.

How about taking his remarks at face-value, you may wonder, instead of suspecting that an issue is hiding under the surface? If you don't listen to relational messages spontaneously, one feature that should catch your attention, and make you switch into listening-for-issues-mode, is the **disproportion between the topic and the reaction to it**. In our example, the exercise on the bar can't account for aggression and continuous swearing: the student's reaction is not in proportion to the topic. The intensity of the reaction reflects the issue. We've all seen groups in lively discussions about seemingly worthless details: the disproportion between the reaction and the topic is an indicator of an underlying issue.

Trying to understand the issue then requires **active listening**. This is often hindered by answering. If a student tells you that she feels your grading of students' performances isn't fair, the temptation is to account for *your* scores and explain *your* point of view. Mostly this gets in the way of

exploring *her* point of view, however. Similarly in our gymnastics example, the issue won't be solved by convincing the student that the exercise on the bar is good for him, no matter the issue.

Sometimes *the context and the event itself* contain the most accessible cues about what the issue might be. You know that the student is sportslike, and appreciated for it. You hear from colleagues that he has difficulty in other classes. You've seen many classes perform the exercise at the bar, and this student wouldn't be the first one to be afraid. You understood from the talking when the students came into the sportshall that they had an exam in the class just before yours. You heard the deep sigh when you presented the exercise. And you'll fit all these data into a plausible interpretation of what the issue is.

The one way to make sure, is to *check your interpretation* with the student involved. Of course students aren't always open to conversation, neither with the teacher nor with other students. Asking what the problem is never hurts, but the kind of answer to expect partially depends on your relation with the class, and thus on the stage of group development.

Guidelines that increase your chances to get a meaningful answer include listening and showing your attention by looking at the speaker, asking open-ended questions to stimulate the student to further clarify the issue, and checking whether you interpret the message right. The last part can imply summarizing what you heard, and asking whether that summary reflects what was said - an approach commonly referred to as 'paraphrasing'.

***Exercise: listening to relational messages***

*Since tracing a development requires keeping data over a period of time, we invite you to make written notes of a number of events immediately*

*after the class. What you write down includes the following:*

- *the date and the class*
- *topics you heard students talk about, and the names of the students involved*
- *moments that struck you by the disproportion between a topic and the reaction to it, and again the names of the students involved*
- *your interpretation of the underlying issue at these moments, and the facts on which this interpretation is based*

*Take 10 minutes to write these data down weekly during the first month, every two weeks during the second month, and monthly afterwards.*

**Making sociograms**

A sociogram can be an interesting means to complement your view on the class: it offers a perspective with hindsight, in a very visual format. We mentioned earlier that sociograms take a variety of forms. We suggest you use the format we used in our example: your sketch then only includes the relations amongst students, and depicts the in-out, up-down, close-far and with-against dimensions.

***Exercise: making sociograms***

*After finishing the first exercise, draw a circle to symbolize the group and -- without using a class list -- position the students in relation to each other. Don't forget to add the date. If in doubt, use*

*the legend to the sociogram on page 4.*

*Compare your sociogram to the class list afterwards: a few students may have escaped your attention so far. Check why during the next class: they're probably 'out' or 'down' on our relational dimensions.*

*Take another 10 minutes to do this.*

*Don't correct this sociogram after the next class -- start a new one.*

The physical education class really is a privileged situation to observe such relationships. As students aren't tied down to their seats, they *may* unconsciously take sociogram positions while they stand together to listen to your instructions, they *may* show the class's subgroups in dividing into volleyball teams, and interpersonal attraction *may* be reflected by the passes in a handball game. Compared to a lot of other teachers, you have the advantage of observing a large field, where such patterns are a lot more visible.

### **The student-teacher relationship**

The only relationship that wasn't covered by our exercises so far, is the students' relation to you as a teacher. Even though you're likely to be one of the students' returning topics, it is likely that you won't hear a lot of what they say about you directly. The probability that you'll hear remarks about the school and its approach to teaching is a lot higher, and such remarks *may* be indirect -- and therefore safer -- messages to you as the school's representative in this class.

### **Exercise: student-teacher relationships**

*The last 5 minutes you combine elements of both exercises described above applied to your own relationship with the students, and add the data to the ones you already have under a separate heading. Write down*

- the topics students talked about with you, and the names of the students involved*
- reactions to you that struck you as being disproportionate, and again names*
- the issue revealed by active listening*

*Under the sociogram, make some notes on how you sense students treat you with regard to our relational dimensions: do they position you in-out, close-far, with-against? On the up-down dimension, down is not an option really, but you may have a feeling concerning how high up you are.*

## Identifying your class's development stage

After writing down your class's topics and issues and drawing its sociograms for a number of weeks, your data probably show some evolution. If you're interested in situating your class on a developmental continuum, you can try to match your data with the contents of the frames describing the model of group development in the first part of this chapter.

### ***Exercise: situating your class in its development as a group***

*Match your data with the expectations given by the 5 frames in part 1. Use the descriptions of the different categories of topic, issue and student-teacher relationships to classify what you wrote down on the subject.*

*The result of this comparison should give you an approximate idea of where your class can be situated in its development as a group.*

This is where the second half of our introductory quote comes in: a classroom is like *no* other classroom. Don't make your data fit the model! First of all because our presentation of the model is a gross simplification for the sake of clarity. You'll find topic and issue co-developing, but not quite as simultaneously as the 5 frames suggest. You'll find some individuals and subgroups develop faster than others, and therefore mess up your tidy classification. And you'll find sociograms containing a few individuals, some dyads and a subgroup, and yourself wondering where to situate them in our scheme. It will be a reminder that you can't fit reality into a 5 stage model...

Fortunately, the emphasis is not on neatly boxing your class in a category. The exercises are meant to get you started in the discovery of group development, not to help pigeon-hole a whole group of people. If they help adding a relational perspective to your view on the class, the exercises met their goal. After all, even if your class group doesn't fit any of these categories, facilitating group development still means getting in touch with the class's issue, and helping them deal with it!

## 2.3. Facilitating group development

Facilitating group development in our view basically means helping the group to deal with its issues. In the remainder of this chapter you'll find a number of ideas for doing so that you could categorize as one of the following approaches: addressing the issue, adapting the task or adjusting the rules and the task-setting.

The first approach consists of **directly addressing the issue**: our active listening to the student refusing to do the exercise on the single bar may lead to a conversation about his anxiety of failing and losing the recognition of his class-mates. On the relational dimensions described earlier, the physical education class is the only one where he has an *up* position. Being unable to maintain a position that is *up* and *with*, he shifted to *against* in an attempt to cope with the expected loss of image. The intensity of his reaction doesn't relate to the gymnastics exercise, but to his fear of losing control or being rejected.

*An interesting aspect of this example is that it shows how many of us spontaneously interpret this student's behavior to reflect a personal problem. The tendency is to think that individual behavior reflects individual issues. The*

*fact that we can describe this student's fear on relational dimensions, illustrates that personal emotional safety is a relational issue, however: students' behavior can never be completely understood without situating it in the context of the class and other relationships.*

Directly attending to the relational issue assumes sufficient group -- or subgroup -- development for the issue to be a safe topic, however. As a consequence this approach is unlikely to be successful during the first few stages we described.

An alternative can be found in **adapting the task**. The idea here is to present exercises that allow the group to deal with its issue, rather than taking the task for granted. It will be obvious to any teacher that the opportunities for student interaction in Swedish gymnastics, a dance class or a soccer game are very different. As a consequence some activities may fit better at one point than at another.

The third approach involves **manipulating the structure, rules and roles** for a given task. It may include a procedure for dividing the class in teams, for example, or a rule that requires the player who scores in a ball game to switch teams. Such adjustments allow you to influence the social structure of an activity without deviating from a required curriculum.

The following paragraphs present aspects that deserve your attention if you want to facilitate group development at each of the 5 stages described earlier.

### **Stage 1: task, inclusion and dependency**

A group doesn't even *start* to develop, if its members don't get the chance to experience they *are* a group. For stimulating your class's growth as a group you thus need to offer **group activities**: activities that make students interdependent in a situation that allows the students' face-to-face contact.

Given the interaction between the task and inclusion -- as described earlier -- we would give special attention to presenting **a variety of activities**. If the activities call for different strengths, students with different capacities will be able to contribute to task accomplishment, and chances are that more students become an active part of the physical education class. An hour of 'new games' may match these criteria, for example.

Different authors point out the importance of a **class setting** where students can see and hear each other (Stanford, 1977; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). While in the physical education class the setting is less stable, the underlying concern is still worth attention: circling up stimulates group interaction where traditional lining up doesn't. Circling up helps to decentralize communication.

When we described the students' relationship to the teacher as 'dependent', that implies that you have the power to initially **define expectations and norms**. It is important for you to state as clearly as possible what you expect from your students, and what they can expect from you and the physical education class. In doing so, you must realise that non-verbal messages are at least as communicative than verbal ones: *what* you say may not be heard, but *how* you say it will come across loud and clear (Neilsen, 1977).

The challenge is to use early classes to **model the kind of behavior you would like during the school year**. Be aware of students' surprising capacity to read cues about your standards: subtle evaluations will suffice as hints for someone to feel safe or threatened in your class (Stanford, 1977). You're in a position to set standards: open and appreciative communication will stimulate group development. Examples include adding some personal information to your presentation of yourself as a teacher, calling students by their *first names*, appreciating *effort* at least as much than performance, and being careful to *not discriminate* or humiliate.

You're in a position also to **encourage this kind of behavior**. We purposefully avoid the word 'enforce' here. This is not

to say that enforcing rules can't be part of your job, only that you have the option to speak for *yourself* instead of presenting the *rule*: if one student insults another one you can request politeness -- that is the rule -- but you could also say "if I were addressed that way, I'd feel hurt: I don't want people to humiliate each other in my class". The expectation is equally clear and the message equally firm. The difference is in how open and personal the communication is: you're now setting the tone for a *friendly* rather than a *polite* class.

While answering students' questions in a first period helps them to gain certainty in the new situation, it makes sense to **stop delivering the answers to questions students can answer themselves towards the end of this first stage**: this may frustrate them to some extent, but will stimulate them to become less dependent. One interesting option is to refer students' questions to the class group for an answer.

## Stage 2: rules, similarity and counterdependence

After the confrontation with the group as a whole, the students start looking for classmates they feel comfortable with. You can facilitate their search for support by regularly including **tasks that allow contact in duos or trios**.

Something we suggested earlier is to **avoid teaching new and complex skills** that may be important later on in the curriculum at this stage, because students tend to be less receptive in this period. It seems worth a special effort to present intrinsically rewarding activities.

As we see artificial climbing walls appear in a number of schools, we think of indoor climbing as an example of an activity that would match the criteria. It allows to work in trios consisting of a climber, a belayer and a back up belayer. For many students climbing is an intrinsically rewarding activity and the immediate importance of the belaying skills to be mastered is likely to

hold students' attention for the time necessary to teach them.

Also in defining the rules for the activity it is important to recognize students' need for support. We suggest you **let students choose their own subgroups** at this stage: in doing so you legitimize friendships that are forming, and the supportive contact they offer. Gene Stanford counters this suggestion observing that choosing and being chosen at this stage are threatening events. He therefore splits up the group *at random*. We think the threat isn't in choosing and being chosen however, but in being forced to choose *explicitly*. If you just ask your class to divide into 4 subgroups, the students have a chance to make a number of implicit choices, which they can still claim to be coincidence. In the mean time they do avoid becoming part of an *unsafe* subgroup.

The hoped for effect of these self-chosen subgroups would of course be annihilated if there's no **opportunity for dialogue**: imposing silence would therefore be a counterproductive rule...

Finally, given the class's increased sensitivity to **rules and similarity** at this stage you may want to pay special attention to respecting the rules you present and applying them to every student alike.

Rewarding group work and **appreciating students' common efforts**, rather than individual performances, stimulates the group in its growth to independency. Unfortunately, the process of growing independent includes turning away from the teacher in some way. For a lot of teachers this period is not easy. While counterdependency in some classes limits itself to a few jokes or riddle-like games that allow students to have more power than their teacher for just one moment, in other classes students seem hostile over long periods of time. There is **no quick fix to counterdependency** however: trying to discuss things openly is very difficult, and often perceived as self-defense -- and in the students' eyes you are too powerful for self-defense to be accepted. Negative

reaction can lead to very poor teacher-class relationships (Neilsen, 1977). The following reminders proved helpful for at least some of us. First of all, don't get paranoid about students' questions: they're not all attacks. Secondly, don't forget that counterdependency only explains why all the critical remarks come at the same time and why they sound so negative: the concept does not imply that the contents of remarks aren't relevant or accurate. In other words: it still is worth your effort to **actively listen** to what students *try* to tell to you (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Stanford, 1977). Third, our model interprets *part* of what you hear as an *overreaction* in an attempt to gain independency, and there is little sense in taking that personally.

### Stage 3: roles, influence and interdependency

After students got to know a few class members really well tasks in **subgroups** are likely to facilitate the beginning *spread effect* in the class's relationships. The composition of these subgroups can emphasize this move even more. We suggest you encourage **varying subgroups that regularly include some less known class members**: the students shouldn't stick with the class members they have always worked with. Rules for choosing or composing subgroups can stimulate this.

You may need to **facilitate or structure some debate** between students holding different viewpoints on the way their subgroup or the class does things and trying to impose their approach. It seems important to remember they are trying to establish their influence: while they may benefit from your facilitation in the conflict, they are unlikely to settle their influence-issue if you keep the discussion from happening or resolve the conflict for them.

As your relationship with the class opens up and as students feel increasingly confident that they don't need your expertise or permission for every move they make, they start taking responsibility. You are now presented with a valuable opportunity

for feedback on your physical education class: at this point in time you can expect your **invitation for feedback on the course** to be answered realistically and with relation to your class, rather than burdened by the students' dependency or counterdependency.

You can also **assign responsibility** for later sessions to particular student teams.

### Stage 4: behavior, equivalence and continuing interdependency

The competitive urge is over by now, and students feel sufficiently safe in their class to **compose subgroups based on task related criteria**, rather than social concerns related to the facilitation of the spread effect.

The class should manage to work in **student-directed subgroups** just fine. Research indicates that such subgroups are preferably **mixed ability groups** working towards a common goal: subgroups should consist of students with different levels of mastery for the task at hand, rather than divide the class based on competence. Within-class grouping based on achievement may have a negative effect on students' understanding and mastery of the course contents and seems to have a negative impact on class relationships, especially if the teacher *labels* the subgroups as competence groups and emphasizes the differences (Weinstein, 1991; Zander, 1982). It is a good moment for **students with specific capabilities to present (part of) a class** that other students can find interesting. In mixed ability subgroups these students can often help their class members who are less familiar with a particular exercise or sport.

Research also suggests that 'co-ed' subgroups optimally consist of **comparable numbers of boys and girls**. If this isn't possible it may be better to not have mixed-gender groups at all (Weinstein, 1991).

As students become interested in you as a person, they may want you to **respond to their curiosity about your life** beyond being a teacher, or expect you to **empha-**

**thize** rather than present the expert solution at times.

### **Stage 5: emotion, intimacy and continuing interdependency**

The group has reached a stage sometimes referred to as 'mature' because its members accept the responsibility for their group-life as well as for their achievement in class (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). As a consequence you can **let students choose** what sports or exercises they want to spend on for a few hours if the curriculum allows you to. You can mostly go along with the spontaneous group structure: the class is able to organize itself.

**“Debriefing” the group’s work and condition** is a constructive step. Schmuck (1978) suggests having a class discussion about the high points and the low points of the last few days. This may result in a problem solving discussion if need be. Bear in mind that this stage is not an end but rather a state of **readiness for further physical and socio-emotional growth**.

### 3. Conclusion

In his chapter we presented a model of group development that may allow you to frame a number of your observations in your classroom, and some guidelines for daily practice. As mentioned earlier, you cannot expect the complexity of group development to be entirely covered by a five stage model, and consequentially the guidelines shouldn't be understood as a set of rules to be applied. We are convinced that the model can serve several purposes however.

First of all we believe this model can serve as a framework for understanding a lot of the findings and advice offered in this book as well as by other sources. We experience ourselves how different bits and pieces of so-called expert information often seem incompatible, and how the end result is confusion and the conclusion that you might as well not believe *any* of it: some experts say this, others say the opposite, so what do I do? We found that we can integrate a lot of seemingly contradictory advice by plotting it on a continuum of group development. Take our suggestions on the composition of subgroups as an example: it is not a matter of *whether* to assign students to subgroups *or* to let them choose, but of *when* to compose the groups *and when* to let things happen. Guidelines that exclude each other at first sight may simply apply to different stages in a group's life.

Secondly, we think the model and the guidelines combined in this chapter can help you to facilitate a group's evolution. Our conviction that both physical and socio-emotional education benefit from facilitating group development was already expressed in the introduction: as relational issues are settled to some degree more energy is available for the physical education task, and groups that evolve to stages of equivalence and intimacy offer crucial opportunities for socio-emotional education.

We would like to emphasize the fact that the guidelines are not intended to be a set of recipes. They become a 'recipe for failure' if treated that way. They need to be backed up by a perspective on and a genuine interest for the issues students deal with to make them work. Facilitating group development has to wade through the complexity of listening to relational messages. Remember your classroom is like *no* other classroom. Consequentially no one technique or single answer is right for classroom management: any and all of your actions will be understood in the context of your relationship with the students, which has its ups and downs as any other relationship. But fully living this relationship and acting accordingly remains the most promising way to create and maintain a healthy learning environment. Our chapter intends to invite you to a new *perspective* on that learning relationship. Because, paradoxically, applying the *rule* for the rule tends not to work. And while it would probably make a teacher's life easier if the recipe approach were successful, it sure would make it less interesting.

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