

## PART E

### A SYNTHESIS OF PRACTICE-BASED ACTION RESEARCH

1. **The Omagh Bomb response: A major cycle of practice-based action research**
2. **Stories from the Omagh Bomb response: Managing Self, Task and Context**
3. **A 'messy' action research story: "When a woman spoke for herself..."**

I shall use this last section of my thesis for two purposes. Firstly, I shall illustrate how I applied action research to an unplanned, volatile situation. Secondly, I shall offer evidence of how I transformed my earlier personal and professional experiences into a useful practice and how this practice then formed a further cycle of action and reflections that further influenced the development of the models and practice framework presented in its current form in Parts C and D.

I have chosen the Omagh response for this purpose for two reasons. First, because the length and breadth of my involvement provided a major testing ground for integrating past learning, stretching from the intense work in the immediate after-math in 1998 through to the medium and long-term responses that ended in 2000 and, thereafter until 2001 other work in the Irish Republic that resulted directly from the Omagh work, The second reason can be found in its timing. The tragedy happened twenty months after I began the CARPP programme and four months after I had completed the Diploma paper when I was searching to clarify my M.Phil. enquiry questions. For the Diploma I had chosen to research the Newbury Community Epidemiology study which I was involved in at the time. Though a useful contribution to my professional practice it was a special case of it and I wanted to return to my core interest in major disaster response. I was eager to practise action research with more intent and rigour and still needed to test out my still tentative disaster response ideas and models in a more comprehensive programme. The opportunity suddenly presented to me by the Omagh bomb response gave me the ideal chance to do both as well as investigate the suitability of action research for use in the volatile environments in which I practise.

I have explained in section A3 the dilemmas of communicating the non-linear process that resulted. While the sequence of my chapters suggests that the Omagh bomb work came after the ideas in Parts C and D were fully formed it did not. I had produced the tentative templates of these ideas through the cycles of action and reflection from the

Hungerford shootings to the three disaster responses I made in 1996. All of these experiences had enhanced certain aspects of my models but I had not had the opportunity to test them out in any response of comparable length to my Hungerford response. The Omagh work gave me this opportunity and it lasted in various forms throughout what I expected to be the duration of my time at CARPP. The initial intensity and the subsequent length of the Omagh work made it an emotionally charged experience that required time for processing and re-processing the experience, much of which I did as I wrote, re-wrote and edited this manuscript. Other major incidents and multiple work-place trauma responses as well as lectures and training programmes interceded in this process and influenced my further reflections on the Omagh work as well as the development of my models presented in Parts C and D. Including accounts of all this later work in a linear fashion was impossible in the space available in this thesis. This later disaster work was much briefer than the Omagh work and contributed to my learning in specific aspects of my work rather than to the whole of it. I therefore decided to concentrate here, in this thesis, on the Omagh response and use the data from later responses to illustrate my enquiries into my articulation of action research, especially in the sections on quality and integrity (section B3) and methodology (section B4).

In this section on my Omagh work, I shall give, in section E1, an overview of the bombing incident, the response by Statutory Authorities, the role my colleagues and I played in this, and the viability of using action research in this situation. I shall follow this with stories from my practice to illustrate how I managed the three elements of my response – self, task and context in section E2 and then conclude with a final story, *“When one woman tells her truth ...”*. This is an account of one distinct part of my work which, because it concerns one school, is bounded enough to be told in more detail than is possible with most other aspects of my response. My work with another school was intense and full of useful learning but I could only choose one example. My choice was made because I had far more contact with the wider system between the face to face work and the processes operating in the background were exposed for more visibly than is usually the case. It gives evidence of the ecological manner of our approach with its interconnected web of tasks and targeted processes; work with individuals, groups and organisations; the political, personal and professional; overt and covert human motivations; the specific and the archetypal.

**E 1****THE OMAGH BOMB RESPONSE:  
A MAJOR CYCLE OF PRACTICE-BASED ACTION RESEARCH****THE OMAGH BOMB DISASTER: A Brief Résumé.**

I shall first give a brief review of the background of the disaster and of the overall Statutory Authority response strategy in which my response was located under my business name, the Centre for Crisis Management and Education (CCME).

**The disaster story: The Incident**

Omagh in County Tyrone is a small market town in Northern Ireland serving a regional population of some 200,000. On the afternoon of Saturday 15th August 1998, the town was crowded with people shopping for the new school term and waiting for the Carnival procession. A coded warning about a bomb placed near the Courthouse was received from the Real IRA, a dissident republican group opposed to the Peace agreement of April that year. The police directed people to the other end of town, in fact right to the place where the bomb was about to explode in a car. The final death toll was twenty-nine plus unborn twins. Nearly four hundred were injured and many witnesses, lay and professional rescuers and hospital staff were traumatised (Sperrin Lakeland HSCT, 1999; Firth-Cozens et al, 1999). Many were children and young people. Half the dead came from Omagh, the other half from surrounding villages, other parts of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Spain. Many children and young people were amongst the dead, bereaved and injured. Injuries were severe including traumatic limb amputation and disfigurement. A teenaged girl lost her eyes.

**The General Response: the management of the aftermath by local agencies.**

The early rescue was led by bystanders and police already in the vicinity. Because of the large numbers injured, they continued helping when the emergency service teams arrived and took people to various hospitals and medical centres. The dead were taken to a temporary morgue set up in the local army barracks. The local Health and Social Care Trust in association with the Omagh District Council quickly organised a centre for relatives where they could be kept informed and made ready for the identification of bodies. An Emergency Information and Support Centre was opened and staffed by volunteers from various victims support and counselling groups from Northern Ireland. A multi-agency co-ordinating group was formed, along with a Community Groups forum

and a Churches Forum, composed of clergy and lay officials from all denominations. These forum encouraged co-operation between local groups and organisations across the town and district. The District Council and the Chamber of Commerce focussed on re-building economic activity in the town through initiatives such as '*Give a Day to Omagh*' and the long-term re-construction of damaged buildings. The psychological support effort soon became the responsibility of the newly established Omagh Trauma Centre, backed by existing local community services and voluntary groups. Several years later, the Omagh Centre became the first trauma centre for Northern Ireland and continues to treat people with clinical post-traumatic stress disorder.

### **My response story: The CCME Team Response**

My inclusion in the response was facilitated by a long-standing colleague who played a key role in the statutory bomb response. I was initially contracted to the Western Education and Libraries Board which had responsibility in the Omagh District for 80 schools plus Libraries, Youth centres and services, and HQ staff and regional Advisors, Welfare and Technical services. Further contracts were obtained with two other Education Authorities, one of which was in the Republic of Ireland. During this time, I also assisted the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust, a Health Board in the Republic, multi-agency co-ordinating groups, the Churches Forum and other community 'agents' and groups.

I led the CCME response and was joined in rotation by three different associates according to their availability. Sue Pittman and Paul Barnard worked with me in the immediate aftermath and in the later stages with schools and Health Boards, while Dr. Lilian Beattie helped with the direct work with teachers and children in one school. I arrived alone ten days after the bombing to persuade Officials that the scale of the work was too great for one person. Thereafter two of us worked from about 8 am to 11 pm nearly every day for the first two weeks. During this first phase, we negotiated our entry into many parts of the system and community, built rapport and assessed the situation and needs while at the same time offering initial support, information and ideas to key managers and professionals in various parts of the service, creating 'agents of recovery' as we proceeded. We began visits to schools requiring more specific support. We assisted in many immediate tasks plus planning for the future. We returned for another week at the end of September when we continued school visits and assisted with emerging issues, such as the visit of US President Clinton and other dignitaries. As the situation began to stabilise, we started to consolidate our initial work and further encourage the local networks we had connected. Other tasks included

helping youth workers to deal with high profile invitations and 'rewards' for victim groups and to respond to the needs of young people about to leave home for University. A great deal of literature (Capewell, 1998b) in the form of handbooks and leaflets was produced throughout and we negotiated with the local media to disseminate self-help tips.

Work continued under different contracts with some of the community groups and two schools and Education Boards at intervals over the next two years until 2000. Follow-up contact was kept with some individuals, some of which continues sporadically. Our work with a school and Health Board in the Irish Republic directly led to work in the Republic with Teacher Unions, schools and a Health Board until 2001.

### **The sources for used for Part E**

The sources I have used for cycles of reflection on this case study of the Omagh bomb impact and response include:

- ☞ correspondence to my contacts immediately after the bombing and correspondence relating to my contracts with the organisations involved in the response
- ☞ notes recorded during the contract and official reports written during and at the end of the contracts (Capewell, 1998a & b, 2000b; Capewell & Pittman, 1998)
- ☞ e-mail dialogues with people engaged in the Omagh work and other aspects of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'
- ☞ local and national newspaper cuttings, especially local papers up to 2000.
- ☞ TV reports and documentaries such as ITV's '*Omagh, One Year On*'
- ☞ articles (Bolton et al 2000, Bradley, 2000, Gillespie et al 2002, Pointon, 2003), including my colleagues account of our work (Pittman, 2000).
- ☞ research documents into the impact on hospital doctors (Firth-Cozens et al, 1999) The Omagh Community Study (Sperrin Lakeland HSCT, 1999), The Omagh Children's Study (Sperrin Lakeland HSCT, 2000) and trauma in children (Purcell, 2001).
- ☞ records of consultancy sessions and collaborative enquiry group sessions with my associates
- ☞ action research studies, (Fay, 1997, Smyth, 1998, 2004 Dyer et al, 1998)
- ☞ books such as *Lost Lives* (McKittrick et al, 1999)
- ☞ face-to-face and phone conversations that have continued since the bomb with people I worked with in Northern Ireland and The Irish Republic.

### **ACTION RESEARCH: A Viable Approach for Responding to Disaster?**

By the time of the Omagh bombing, action research had become my preferred practice option on theoretical, ideological and practical grounds. Many enquiry questions were therefore at the forefront of my mind as my entry into another disaster became more likely. These included questions of the kind: *“How well could action research be done when people and systems were totally engaged in survival, overwhelmed by distress or in a state of shock and numbness?”*, *“Would I be able to act in an action research mode in a situation containing many unknowns and difficult issues when I was still learning the methodology?”*, *“Could I create something that would spark off further loops of action enquiry so that the work could continue after my team had left?”*, *“How far was I able to engage others in this process and create ‘communities of enquiry’ where people felt equal in influencing what was done?”*, *“Was this possible where my status as an external consultant requiring fees immediately created dilemmas for some people?”*, *“Could a process be initiated that would help the community (or at least key parts of it) to know itself better in their disrupted state and begin to heal itself?”*. I was experiencing working on the ‘edge of chaos’ and the need to ‘manage ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity’ described by Weil as a reality of public sector work but without any agreed opportunity to use the systemic action research methods she advocates (Weil,1998: 37-61).

Deciding how to tell my Omagh action research story has also been difficult as so many of the keys to decision-making lie in the many minute details that would soon overwhelm a reader. I was a synthesising conduit for a multitude of interrelated, iterative feedback loops of processes, tasks, relationships and conversations that are difficult to disentangle. I have chosen a route that made most sense to me as I wrote and tried to make sense for readers. I decided to show how my action research strategies were applied to each group of tasks that contributed to the path we constructed, a process that acted as a model to our partners of how they could create theirs while we walked alongside. This will be done using examples of how I managed the three elements of the disaster response described in Part D: self, task and context.

Before doing this, I shall outline the key contextual features of the disaster situation and then consider how these affected the viability of using action research strategies and methods in my response to the bombing:

- ☞ **the many unknown variables in the disaster situation** meant that an approach that kept an open, enquiring mind was preferable to applying past patterns and methods from approaches used in previous situations in a prescriptive manner. An assessment using my S-S CIRA model (Part D, diag. 12) showed that there were many site and incident specific variables interacting with the objective reality of the disaster in each of the many parts each community affected by the bomb. Past experience and existing theories were helpful informants, but they needed to be adapted or re-created for local conditions.
- ☞ **there were so many actors and stakeholders** involved in the response who would determine their own response, including private individuals, private companies, public, statutory and voluntary agencies at local to national levels.
- ☞ **the consequences of the disaster impact were unknown.** It could be expected from previous experience that certain repercussions were likely, but predicting how they would be manifested was difficult. In addition, suggesting to local people that preventative action be taken to mitigate them was a dangerous route when community bonding was intense and they could not believe it would ever be otherwise.
- ☞ **the disaster work was a strange land** for many people and agencies where existing signposts for living had been torn down. In addition to negotiating new territory, it was necessary to seek help from **external professionals** who had the level of expertise, experience and detachment from the impact required for a disaster on this scale. Even with my experience of working in the area and with local agencies beforehand, I was still entering a different part of the organisation and working with different people at a time when they felt vulnerable because their existing systems and skills had been overwhelmed or challenged.
- ☞ **the volatile, ever-changing situation** meant that no one could be sure what was needed or for how long, making contracting for an uncertain task and future difficult. Opinions of decision-makers using their own reactions and often ill-informed beliefs were as varied and changeable as the situation.
- ☞ **the needs were complex and large-scale, covering an extended disaster community.** No one person, agency or group of agencies could manage the situation without the consensus and participation of the communities involved.

These factors meant that any rigidly defined response and contract was unsuitable. The complex, ever-changing situation required an approach that could accommodate emerging needs, many opinions, and many self-determining people, each on their own post-trauma journey. Further, I could only offer a contract and approach which would

allow me to be true to my own values and professional expertise. The community work style that I had used throughout my career contained many elements of action research and was thus an obvious choice for me. This approach could be enhanced by my new learning about action research in the following ways:

- ☞ more **disciplined reflection** before action – important in emergency situations where reactivity, quick cures and the need to control can be a defence against distress and chaos.
- ☞ more rigorous framing in a set of **beliefs and values** that defined the action research approach
- ☞ a **wider range of strategies and methods** to call on, and the principles and confidence to adapt them for new uses or to create alternatives
- ☞ **support** from a community of action research practitioners.
- ☞ a philosophy that validated **the integration of practice and research**, where the knowledge created could influence the subsequent action.
- ☞ the **valuing of diverse and locally created knowledge** from lived experience, that was not overridden by remotely created theoretical knowledge.
- ☞ **quality and integrity** could be checked and tested as I worked, and improvements made when it mattered.
- ☞ having a framework that encouraged **participation and creativity**.
- ☞ having the **liberation of people** as a goal, especially vital in a situation where people could easily be trapped by their trauma if appropriate action was not taken at the right time. Many of the specific trauma methods I had developed, such as the Trauma Process and BE FIT & Phys models, also had this aim.
- ☞ having an approach where **practical actions and outcomes** were valued, more than those that adhered to pre-determined rules.

Though action research appeared to be the only way I could approach this uncertain situation and contract, the conditions I encountered placed limits on the type of action research I could undertake. It had to be:

- ☞ a strategy of possibilities and aspirations showing mainly in the attitudes and presence I brought to the work in the relationships and conversations
- ☞ demonstrated in the quality of attention given to each person or situation, and in my ability to enquire in a way that helped people become their own enquirers as they researched their own journeys.



There was little place for:

- ☞ **formal procedures and groups** needing pre-planning and organisation. I was contracted to an organisation that did not want to interrupt its normal timetable to have regular meetings about the disaster response. In most schools curriculum and exam timetables could not easily give way to more than a brief mention of the bomb, though there were a few notable exceptions who found ways to manage this.
- ☞ **true democratic participation** in all stages of the strategy, because people in a state of shock or denial did not make easy partners in such endeavours. They wanted to hand everything over to an expert but at the same time did not want to lose control or their belief that they should know what to do.

These core requirements of action research therefore had to be embodied in me and my colleagues as we worked with managers and professionals. By modelling the passing on of skills, information and ideas, we empowered them and encouraged them to do the same with their staff and in the community. We sought out the views of as many different people as we could so that we could build a representative story of needs to Managers so that they could respond in a more democratic manner.

## E 2

### STORIES FROM THE OMAGH BOMB RESPONSE: MANAGING SELF, TASK AND CONTEXT

Though it is not easy to separate such interdependent elements of my work, I shall organise these stories according to the three spheres of managing a disaster response defined in Part D: Managing Self, Managing Task and Process and Managing Context. A story that gives a holistic picture of my practice will be given in the story in Part E3 which concludes this thesis about our extended programme of work in a school.

#### **SPHERE 1: MANAGING SELF**

##### **Readiness for entry to the Omagh bomb response.**

Before I gained entry to the disaster response, I had to manage my own personal issues at the time and my own reactivated anxieties about entering another uncertain disaster contract, being sensitive to the usual jibes directed towards external experts. To work effectively within the contract, I had to manage my reactions to distressing stories and displacement activities, such as denial, power games and sabotage, that I knew were all too common in systems disrupted by disaster.

At the root of my self-management lay an examination of my personal readiness to do this work. My main tools were action inquiry and making use of the personal applications of my own models such as BE FIT & Phys and the Trauma Process Map. From the moment I heard about the bomb, I began to pay attention to my thoughts, feelings and reactions, first in order to deal with my reactions to the horror of the incident and the fact that places and people I knew could be affected. Then I turned to reflecting on how I could support colleagues I knew would be heavily involved, ending with the motivating question, '*What can I do?*' Once I had been asked to consider responding myself, my initial support of my existing networks then began to merge into tasks for preparing for entry. I set about gaining information purposefully. I sent 'tasks' that could help school Principals establish 'circles of vulnerability' in their schools, such as the school triage exercise, to my existing contacts in the area. By doing this, I was also knocking in the 'tent pegs' in several places that would establish 'agents of recovery' and thus smooth my entry and stabilise my position once there.

### Support and resources

By the time of the Omagh bomb, I had learnt that contracting, even in volatile imperfect conditions was important to my self-management. I also knew that my stress would be kept manageable if I could maintain congruence between my beliefs, values and actions. If I could account for anything I did with my heart, head and body, and manage my professional boundaries, then I could ride any situation that came my way. The first-person action research methods described in Part B therefore had to be constant companions in my strategy, from testing my motives for the initial entry, then negotiating many other entries, to dealing with various types of ending. With this disaster response, I was far more rigorous than before in keeping time-lines with multiple columns to note personal reactions and insights. When I was exhausted, I used images and key words to aid my recall of events and reactions. The regular use of my associates, professional and personal friends for second-person enquiry helped to prevent self-delusion and add insights from their perspectives. The account in Story Box 21 shows how I used 'in- the-moment' action inquiry to manage myself as I dealt with a new organisation, new people and a new disaster situation.

#### STORY BOX 21

##### MEETING THE UNKNOWN WITH ACTION INQUIRY

*“Walking down the corridor to the first of several ‘defusing’, information and problem-solving sessions for school Principals, I mirrored their fears of helplessness and incompetence we were there to allay. I had no idea how many would turn up and I was fearful of the denial and resistance I might meet. Questions ran through my head, ‘Would the room be suitable and set up? Who would be present to introduce us?’ We had a few plans up our sleeves, but everything might need to be changed. I grabbed a few moments in the Ladies to practise techniques to prepare myself, check and deal with negative feelings and offer my work to the greater good for a purpose that transcended my own. Paul and I did a quick exchange of observations and feelings as we tuned in to the atmosphere as people arrived. We also had to give attention to the people needing to engage with us. Mr Y, who was there to introduce us, fussed around and talked incessantly. I did my best to calm him down. That’s when I noticed my experience taking over. Taking responsibility and leading was never my non-crisis forte, but when all around are terrified and uncertain, I take the power of my expertise, designated role and experience and take charge gently, but firmly, until others are ready to allow me to drop back into my preferred role. When I stood up to address the audience, I felt another force take over and carry me through.”*

– Taken from records, 1998

From past experience, I had learnt the importance of having good physical and logistical back-up when engaged in intense, distressing work. I had to argue my case not to do such a potentially large piece of work alone, and as a result funding was granted so that I could always have an associate with me. Unusually, the stress of having to ask for resources to do our job was taken away as we were provided with a car, good accommodation and designated clerical support and co-ordinator without having to ask for it. The clerical team was excellent and they also provided us with valuable information about the history and dynamics of the organisation that helped defuse anxieties about aspects of the system that puzzled us.

### **Inter-personal issues and organisational dynamics**

One of the most challenging tasks was managing my personal reactions to behaviours and statements that made us vulnerable to being caught in existing interpersonal dynamics in the organisation. They also challenged my ability to be respectful of others. The disaster stress made existing dynamics more degenerative.

Many stresses resulted because of the choice of one particular person linking us to the rest of the organisation. This appointment had been made for reasons of organisational politics rather than suitability for the role. The clerical team had warned us of this person's inefficiencies and they did what they could to help. We noticed the resistance of this person to our presence in the incongruence between his actions and words, for example not being present to introduce us to a new group and breaking confidentiality to the extent that we often felt he was 'laying mines' for us with other managers. Occasions like this were usually resolved after my colleague and I set up peer-enquiries to work out what was really going on at an organisational and personal level so that we could de-personalise situations and deal with them clearly.

Another critical moment occurred when I discovered that many of the information booklets I had prepared for schools and support agencies had not been sent out as promised. No one knew where the person had gone, the senior officer was in Belfast, and I was about to leave Omagh, not knowing if the contract would be extended. I therefore broke the boundaries of always working through the designated management lines and asked the clerical staff to take the papers off his desk and send them out. I knew this carried a risk for me, but the schools had been promised this information several weeks before and needed it to deal with immediate issues. At this point I could not tell whether the officer's inaction was due to sabotage (having already experienced

several acts of sabotage), inefficiency or a symptom of being overwhelmed by the disaster.

Situations such as this caused me more stress than working with the direct distress of the bomb. The resonance with my Hungerford experience reactivated old feelings and fuelled my reactions. I was again faced with the conflicting interests of an organisation and the needs of the community it was there to serve. I had to draw on a variety of processing methods and channels of knowing to manage my own reactions. In some cases this involved changing my attitudes and behaviour, but at other times, these could not be changed without addressing issues at an organisational level and occasionally at a higher political level.

One example occurred at the interface between managing myself and managing the task and process in my reactions to the decisions taken about extending our contract. The following account contain only the bare outlines of this example as there were many other details that I do not feel at liberty to expose in an open document:

*“The senior manager in charge of the contract had spent a lot of unofficial time with us over meals showing great interest in our work, but he was rarely in the office and had not set up a disaster response team of senior managers for regular briefings meetings. The disaster response work was still seen as something that should disrupt normal routines as little as possible. Although he had personally valued our work, he was unable to enact his insight and we could not obtain an answer about our contract before we left after the first phase. We knew from previous experience how much harder it would be once we had left. When he finally phoned to express doubts about the need for more, it still came as a shock and I fought hard to deal with my own reactivity. I then had to work on a strategy for changing his mind, helped by my ‘internal ally’ who had negotiated my initial entry. Knowing that other agencies and schools we had not yet had time to visit wanted us to return was a tremendous support. I recognised the personal factors driving me too. This was the best chance I had ever had of seeing a response through to a reasonable point and testing learning from previous disasters. It was also a source of material for this thesis.”*

I employed these strategies to manage my reactions:

⇒ the BE FIT & Phys model to turn my reactivity to more positive feelings and action

- ⇒ my networks in Omagh to make representations on our behalf.
- ⇒ my BE FIT &Phys model to work out how I could regain rapport with the senior manager. Rational arguments did not seem to work. I had experienced him as a man of vision and passion and I knew I had to appeal to his belief channel and talk in a language which made him feel recognised. As he was a classicist, I chose a conceptual framework for continuing the work, drawing on the classical metaphor of my adaptation of Handy's 'gods of management' ideas (Handy, 1989) to disaster management (Capewell, 1992). I also used the Trauma Process Model to illustrate the need for a transitional period from our work in the early aftermath to the medium-term stage of response.

I used the classical metaphor again in my letter and when he phoned back. I could hear the change in his voice as I spoke in a language he related to and I knew we would be returning. However, the delay meant the opportunity for a more planned approach we had wanted had gone. On our return, it was encouraging that our stay was extended by a day and I was asked to prepare a long-term proposal. Therefore, the phone call a week later saying our contract would not be continued struck me like a thunderbolt from the blue. The reason given was that *“school Principals had reported that everyone was coping and any pupils needing help were receiving it”*. I knew there had been no systematic means of reaching this conclusion. Primary schools, and schools outside of the town had not been consulted and Youth workers and several school Principals still wanted our help. Later I was told that only a few Principles had actually been consulted.

This decision, or rather the manner in which it was made, sent me into reactivity and unproductive circular thinking from which I felt I could not escape and which would send me crazy. It re-stimulated deep emotions from my Hungerford experiences and it felt as if nothing had changed after 11 years of trying to make things better for young people after disaster. The old dilemmas were still unresolved: *How could people be persuaded to take preventative action against repercussions that they had not yet experienced and which they did not want to believe would happen to their community? How could you persuade senior managers to learn from the experience of past disasters? How could you persuade them to believe what we had heard in private from Principals and teachers who were too afraid to expose their vulnerability to managers who might judge them?*

I had to make an effort to manage my despair and discovered how my Trauma Process Map could be used for breaking my negative cycles of thinking. I sensed there was little hope of changing the senior manager's mind for a second time as the community were at the stage of superficial restoration and apparent normality before the longer term impact had become visible. However, I managed my reactions sufficiently to send a letter acknowledging the difficult position he was in and offering my insights into the dynamics of the situation. I also wanted to cover my professional back by having in writing that the decision had gone against my recommendations and those of other local professionals, as well as against disaster management theory.

I knew this premature ending was part of the disaster process and that managers had the right to exercise their free will, but I had an unhelpful tendency to feel I had failed the work. I was somewhat consoled by the two new contracts being negotiated for work with schools in different Education Authorities and the fact that some of the work we had started would continue because we had succeeded in empowering local professionals. However, the management of my reactions was necessary for some time. I employed these strategies:

- ⇒ tracking back to make connections with similar past experiences and basic life patterns, such as not being believed and then trying to prove myself.
- ⇒ making more cognitive sense of what happened. A book published in the next year (Zinner & Williams, 1999) provided me with a key phrase, coined by responders in schools affected by the Oklahoma bomb, that summed up the Omagh position:
 

*“school Principals used their own coping styles and ideas as yardsticks to evaluate and make decisions regarding the emotional needs of children in their schools, in spite of advice from people who had been working directly with children”* (Sitterle & Gurwitch, 1999: 186).
- ⇒ Checking with local sources to see if children and schools had really recovered so quickly. I heard and read about a number of suicides of young people in the next few months and the increase in young people seeking help from the Trauma Centre. These young people complained that schools were only interested in school work and exam grades and they could not concentrate on anything else except the bomb. The large-scale Omagh Community Study (Sperrin HSCT, 1999) and Omagh Children's Study (Sperrin HSCT, 2000) confirmed that many people were still suffering and had not accessed specific trauma help.
- ⇒ Keeping in touch with my professional networks in Omagh and hearing that some aspects of the work we facilitated continued, such as collaborative groups between

teachers and the Community Oral Archive was co-ordinated by the Library Service. After some months, schools requested visits from the Trauma team staff, though this placed an extra burden on them. A special 'trauma' youth worker was also appointed as recommended, though it took a year. In 1999, the Chief Executive and my 'internal ally', the Director of Community Care, wrote a joint strategy to address the needs of children and young people (Martin & Bolton, 1999) and they also joint-funded a cyber café staffed by a youth worker with links to the Trauma Centre.

- ⇒ Writing to the Northern Ireland Minister for Education, John McFall MP to gain a meeting to discuss policy issues that this premature closure of the response raised. The meeting was cancelled because of his withdrawal on the re-establishment of Northern Ireland Assembly.
- ⇒ Making contact with an academic researcher at a Belfast university who had measured high rates of trauma in a survey of schools (Purcell, 2001). At the point he felt he was making progress with the Education Boards, they suddenly withdrew interest (personal communication).
- ⇒ Having my work acknowledged and used at a national level by the Irish Teachers' Unions and the Ulster Teachers' Union, reminded me that there were others who valued what we had done (Capewell, 2000a).
- ⇒ Using the experience for more general learning about the process of disaster work.

As I had found before with the conflicts with bosses, real healing only came with some acknowledgement from the person behind the action that caused the hurt. Two years after the bomb, I was in Omagh as part of another contract and using a building owned by the Education Board. I was in a canteen queue and when I turned round came face to face with the senior manager that had discontinued our work. In his surprise (he had no idea I was in Ireland), his first words were "*you know everything you and Sue warned us about has happened, especially the fragmentation in the community.*" A year later I was back in Omagh en route to work in Donegal. I invited him for a meal and he presented me with a beautiful print, painted by an artist in memory of the people killed by the bomb, in recognition of what we had achieved.

### **Finding personal support**

Gaining personal care and support was at times difficult and a pattern emerged that when I needed it most, things happened to exaggerate my need. Inefficiencies in the hotel meant that I had to give the staff their early morning call if we were to be sure breakfast would be cooked; my day off was interrupted by a hoax bomb alert that kept me separated from my belongings and car for nearly five hours; and when I escaped to



a special, nurturing guest house in Donegal for a second time, the proprietress was having a breakdown and was angry I was there. Nearly every other place I stayed seemed to be run by a bereaved parent or someone connected to the bomb who needed to offload their stories on me. The wild beaches and hills were my saving. I had to draw deeply into my personal reserves and compartmentalise all the other things going on at home, such as my son leaving home for University and the health and accommodation problems of my elderly mother-in-law. During a reflexology session, I had my blood pressure taken and discovered it was very high – a problem I had never envisaged having, but an impact of the stressful work that I could not deny.

### **Dealing with 'stuck' images**

Images from often repeated stories of the dead and injured also began to get stuck in my memory. I managed these with the first and second person enquiry. One image involved a person with horrific injuries so I asked my colleague Sue, who had experience in hospital work, how the injuries would be treated. As she told me, I noticed how the stuck image was shifting as I mentally transferred the patient to hospital and had the injuries cleaned and repaired. I adapted this method of 'rolling the film on' for other stuck images. However, one image was burnt too deeply in my brain. It concerned a girl who had been blinded by the bomb and had become an icon of a 'brave survivor' in the disaster. During a CARPP conference, a colleague offered to facilitate my process to deal with this image. As we sat on a grassy bank I heard water trickling nearby and, encouraged by Geoff (his presence, more than words), I tried to 'wash away the image'. I could not do this until I realised that I needed to honour the pain of the girl first and that letting go of the image felt like a betrayal of her experience. I therefore also had to re-frame my 'stuck' guilt cognitively by telling myself that keeping it would neither help her nor myself. The ritual worked for me and I have used it many times since to encourage people to create their own self-help techniques.

## **SPHERE 2: MANAGING THE TASK**

Action research methods aided my work from the start. I used my learning about 'entry' (see p.206) and contracting from previous cycles of action and reflection and paid close attention to 'drip feeding' information to the potential clients so they could understand what was being offered without being overwhelmed. This information also included simple suggestions for tasks that could begin the process of assessing the impact on schools and staff in the different Departments and services for which the Board had a

duty of care. Some staff were victims, some were bereaved and some, in the Omagh Library in particular, had been heavily involved in the immediate rescue and recovery.

On arrival in Omagh, there was no time to lose after the initial meetings with senior managers. Their expectation for immediate action, and probably immediate solutions, was high. The size of the task, and the urgency to support schools before the approaching first day of term, meant that I had to act quickly. In such circumstances, the combination of adrenalin, fear (of the unknown and the high expectations), and the confidence and knowledge gained from previous disasters concentrates my mind so that my whole body is receptive. It focuses on the task in hand, but not the task in isolation from the past, future and other current issues. I experience a rapid flow of consciousness born of the need to perform the task and my need to survive, protecting myself and colleagues from the pitfalls discovered in similar situations in the past.

This stream of consciousness allows all the verbal and non-verbal cues around to be caught up in the stream until they emerge as spontaneous, intuitive feelings, then images, thoughts and actions. Many things are absorbed – what people say, the congruence and incongruence between actions and words, the patterns of relationships, the significant moments and the insignificant periods between, the metaphor, the atmosphere (which after a disaster is so emotionally laden that it can be touched, smelt and tasted), the taken for granted artefacts and rituals of the organisation, its rules, its quirks and especially how I experience the place and the people and their interactions with me. I allow myself to experience unchecked, then make myself detach, using several **first-person** detachment techniques (section B4) to gain different perspectives on the situation. If there is time, I draw on my training in Adlerian individual Psychology and try to work out the underlying purposes or goals of behaviour. In this way I pick up attitudes towards us as external consultants, relationship dynamics and politics within and between agencies, as well as attitudes towards the disaster and the response. I check my observations and feelings in **second-person enquiries** with my colleagues and listen to theirs, noting the differences, always mindful that we can both be wrong.

This **'in the moment research'** is only **'for the moment'** and may not be valid for the moment after. Even in the moment when the action occurred, the research had to continue as if in constant flow to check that the right assumptions and decisions were made and to adapt to the nuances of the reality. Such moments arise from necessity

when there is no time to plan or when the plans can only be sketches because so much is uncertain.

To give some certainty to the unknown situation in Omagh, I produced an initial strategy of enquiry, rather than prescribed activity, that allowed for plenty of variety in the way it was undertaken. I described it in terms of the 'making a path' metaphor as follows:

- ⇒ Establishing the right of way and boundaries, designing blueprints for action.
- ⇒ Assessing the situation and the work to be done using the Trauma Process Map, circles of vulnerability and the S-S CIRA concepts
- ⇒ Outreach to the community as a whole using Kfir's crisis intervention model and my '*Bridging the Gap*' and '*Fishing Nets and Stepping Stones*' models.
- ⇒ Targeting the parts of the community that were more vulnerable to strong reactions and might require reactive as well as proactive support.
- ⇒ Consolidating the work and reviewing the next paths.

I will expand on the phases of this strategy more fully, though several phases usually operated alongside each other.

#### **Phase 1: Gaining entry and establishing boundaries and ways of working together.**

From the start of negotiations with the Education Board, the task was to assist the Board in working out how they could best respond to the impact of the disaster using me in '*the role of facilitator and catalyst to mobilise, co-ordinate and support existing local resources*' (contract proposal, 1998). In this statement, I was communicating my intention to walk alongside in partnership with the Board in a way that was grounded in their context and did not impose prescriptive answers. This idea had to be reinforced many times when I felt that what was really wanted was a magic wand to make everything better within a few days. I noticed the dilemma for someone hoping to work democratically using action research, but I persisted in not giving the client what they believed they wanted because it was impossible. Part of the walking alongside was a gentle process of education knowing that clients often changed what they wanted as they moved further out of the initial shock. As Sela had found in Israel, sometimes a 'therapeutic dialogue' has to be set up with the educational system as the 'identified patient' if the agreed aim of restoration is to be achieved (Sela, 1993: 95-97).

Ways of working with my associates was another aspect of the management of task. I had worked with the three with me in Omagh before and we were at ease with each other. They were all people with their own skills and their own independent businesses or jobs. We had a mutual arrangement whereby we assisted in each other's work as associates rather than as co-workers so accepted that we had unequal responsibilities and roles. Whoever was responsible for gaining and managing the contract led the work and the assistants fitted in. This arrangement worked well for disaster contracts there was little time for preparation and their presence was intermittent. As the one constant person keeping the Omagh contract together, I had to rely heavily on intuition and take full responsibility for what I did, but my associates always tempered my insights. The fact that they left and returned meant they could see the situation with an outsider's vision. I had chosen my associates because their attitudes and approaches were congruent with mine and because they had a solid professional background and inside experience of disaster work. They all had skills which were complementary to mine and I tried to match them to specific areas of work where they could excel. All of my associates understood the need for constant dialogue and co-supervision - as we worked and at the end of each day and contract. We all met after each contract in a co-enquiry group.

### **Phase 2: Assessing the situation**

My strategy of action research to approach this uncertain contract had to begin with assessments of all aspects of the disaster, resources (including myself), contexts and affected people, using my S-S CIRA model (formulated but not yet named as such) as a guide. Initially, I used information gleaned from the media and local contacts to map spatial data and record other information that might be relevant, bearing in mind questions such as "*What is the significance of this disaster?*" that helped me make tentative connections to prepare my mind. Once in Omagh, the only way to build on these first assessments was to draw others into a collaborative exercise so that many more people would be contributing to the data collection and thinking.

### **Phase 3: Outreach to the community: Collaborative enquiry groups.**

I held in my mind the maps and models described in Part D. I was 'Bridging the Gap' by helping local services (schools, libraries, youth services, community groups, and churches) to create systems and empower their staff to assess needs and serve their community as conduits of information, ideas and support (Kfir, 1988). Work with other professionals, such as psychologists and the multi-agency team, none of whom had specific training in disaster response, were used to encourage them to create

accessible services or to be pro-active in reaching out into the community. I used the Trauma Process Map to outline the process ahead and showed how it could be used to plan services and apply them at appropriate times. The map proved to be a means of rapid engagement of the audiences.

Our first meetings with key personnel in the Education and Libraries Board (the Board of Governors, Heads of Service; teams of support services, such as Advisors; school Principals and Governors) began the process of establishing our presence as credible, acceptable external facilitators, but also served to gather information about the system and the impact on key managers and staff. Similar sessions were held with community group leaders and clergy, who often chaired school Boards. In addition, the meetings provided the means of defusing their shock, mobilising their own systems and creating 'agents of recovery' who could help us in achieving the task throughout this widespread system. An example of one of these sessions, in this case with school Principals, is given in Story Box 22 on the following page.

The first task was to encourage the mapping of 'circles of vulnerability' in the central administration, the schools, youth centres and libraries. The 'agents' would then be asked to do the same for the schools, libraries and youth centres. Initial mapping could be done from what people already knew, but this could only be tentative. We passed on ideas about the pro-active 'casting of nets' in a variety of forms that enabled information to be gathered using any sources and forum open to them in their normal roles, such as groups set up to give information, parents' meetings and just listening attentively to conversations. These in turn became the 'stepping stones' to the next level of help for those who needed it. The Educational Psychology Service and Welfare Officers were in a position to gain more specific information, and handbooks were written to help them do so. Other information packs were written for teachers and youth workers.

We could not force anyone to do any of these things in an unprepared system with untrained managers and no crisis management procedures to enforce them. However, information and ideas had been injected into many parts of the organisation and embryonic systems had been created. Handbooks had been written to ensure every service leader and every school and college Principal had good quality information on which to base decisions, whether or not they could attend the meetings. Certain key people in services that had a very important role to play had done nothing before our arrival, and some still refused to accept that they had a vital role, but at least now some

of their staff felt moved to act in spite of their resistant managers. The fact that our work was backed by the Education Board gave them strength to do what they could.

## STORY BOX 22

### 'CREATING COLLABORATIVE ENQUIRERS'

*It was 10 days after the bombing, schools were still on holiday and meetings were held to bring School Principals and Deputies together....*

*'...emotions were high and I sensed exhaustion, uncertainty and shock. They first needed to know who we were, what we were there to do and our perspective on the role of schools. Boundaries had to be set to make this a safe space. For most, this was the first time they had stopped for reflection since the bomb.*

*In the presentation, I used metaphor as a gentle way of imparting information about the impact of disaster and to explain the different coping strategies that people would use, with the consequences of over-use of certain styles. Suggesting that the same or similar images could be used in school gave them a practical reason for listening attentively. I chose the metaphor of an unwanted parcel with unknown contents that couldn't be returned and asked them to reflect on all the different responses to the parcel and the consequences of each. This coaxed the audience naturally into active participation. Further questions were posed that implied the possibility of choice and creative solutions, thus promoting the idea that, with some basic information and concepts, their ideas could be as good as mine.*

*Term would soon start and Principals would soon be overrun with other school business and a desire to return to normal, so I used my **Trauma Response Map** to give an overview of the long-term process and how healthy choices could be promoted at key points. It facilitated participation and gave relief that they could take positive action to help. It provoked a change in mood and questions began to be asked.*

*Questions were gathered, the most urgent one being, 'What do we do on the first day back at school?' I used this to model the need for collaborative problem-solving, referring to key school response principles, rather than fixed answers. Principals were thus given digestible tips, related to their most pressing concern. Our enquiring questions encouraged them to think through their own solutions so we did not attract the 'yes, but' and 'it wouldn't work in our school' responses. We encouraged them to continue meeting in this way to share ideas and support each other. I ended by affirming their capacity to find a way through together, and, without denying the horror of the incident and the dark days ahead, I chose words of encouragement that suggested hope for the future.'* - Taken from records, 1998.

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#### **Phase 4: Targeting specific needs**

Following these initial 'cover-all' meetings, sessions were given to target specific needs. First, opportunities were given for **personal processing of reactions** for any members of staff, either in individual sessions or small groups, for example, of school Principals. We knew the stigma of asking for personal help was such that we would not be overwhelmed, but the meetings acted as a symbol that staff had 'permission' to be personally affected. The sessions meant a great deal to those who came, and in turn provided us with more information and, sometimes, more contact with their schools. Some of the Library staff who were bereaved and injured by the bomb, witnesses or rescuers, came for several individual sessions and we were the stepping stones to more specialist help for them. They gave us insights from the heart of the impact, especially about cultural issues that helped and hindered recovery. I learnt that the disruption of disaster could render even large, 'close-knit' families temporarily unsupportive to the member affected.

One group of Library and Education HQ staff that were sent to me, without reference to my criteria for doing so, tested my facilitation skills and this is retold in Story Box 23 on the following page. This group session provided a rich experience that could not have happened with a perfectly run situation or with controlled, standardised procedures. It was made possible by the action research approach, with its accommodation of emergent events and tools that enabled me to deal with the unexpected. The session defused anger and fear, replacing it with insight and understanding that prevented divisions between people becoming a problem and moved them to the next stage of their journeys. It also provided me with evidence of a difficult to pin down dynamic and a learning story to pass on to others.

Second, we began to book **outreach sessions** for visits to specific schools to share our information with school staff teams, 'defuse' reactions and give support targeted to the needs of the schools. These visits took us into the heart of the communities and provided more information about needs and community dynamics that we could feedback to the senior managers and to the multi-agency response team. Every school had a different culture, a different relationship to the disaster and different needs. Action research strategies were essential to our ability to manage each task. We rushed from one part of County Tyrone to another and, on one occasion, to County Donegal in the Irish Republic. Second person reflections and preparation were done as we drove from school to school.

**STORY BOX 23****BRIDGING THE DIVISIONS**Formatted: Line spacing:  
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*'I was asked to see a group of Library staff. During the round of introductions, it became clear that other types of HQ staff had also been told to attend. Of more concern was the massive difference in their relationship to the bomb. They fell into three distinct groups: relatives of the bereaved and injured; witnesses and rescuers; those who were away from Omagh at the time of the bomb. The 'hierarchy of suffering' dynamic was activated in several ways. Each group had a reason why the group was obviously not for them – either they did not want 'to intrude on others' grief', or they had no right to be present because they weren't even there at the time. I had to deal with my negative thoughts about how the session had been 'sold' to staff and my concern that personal needs were too diverse for personal work in a short session. I could have abandoned the session, but I also knew the group were linked by their anger at their organisation for 'having done nothing for them', for jokes being made by some managers about the bomb, and the lack of recognition of the stress created by continued and regular hoax bomb warnings. I was galvanised into action when I realised that what we could have in this group was a microcosm of post-disaster community divisions that are created between groups with different experiences. While I felt my way into how I should continue the session, I shared this insight with the group and suggested we could try to deal with the issue we had in front of us – how to build bridges of communication across the barriers felt between each group.*

*Using past learning from group facilitation, I invited each group to say something about their special perspective, followed by questions from the rest for clarification.*

*Tensions relaxed once they had some insight about each other. I asked each group to talk about what they most needed from the other groups. In order to equalise the giving and receiving of support, I then asked each to say what they could give to the others.*

*Now that the barriers were down, it was possible to talk more about the barriers to defuse their power further. - Taken from my records, 1998*

Action inquiry approaches helped us to keep our focus and pay acute attention to every cue as we approached and entered each school. Every school needed a different entry process and we used my three models of school response as a quick method of classification and to guess the degree of preparedness and level of receptiveness and resistance we might encounter. In turn, I gained a great deal of knowledge to add to my existing store about schools after disaster.

Only one school we visited had any existing crisis plans and it was noticeable that it was this school that welcomed us most warmly, asked most questions and made best



use of what we offered. They were also a school badly hit by the disaster, but their culture and the healthy dynamics between senior managers and staff made for an excellent recovery environment for their injured and bereaved pupils. Information sent to me several years later showed they created a varied, co-ordinated and long-term recovery programme. Another school, badly hit by the disaster, had no plans, but had been involved in piloting a scheme for developing emotional literacy. This had prepared them well for dealing with emotional issues. Our session there was particularly moving and the culture and atmosphere demanded an approach that reached emotional and spiritual places not possible elsewhere. This was the first of many visits to the school.

Other schools were more challenging. In one, our invitation had come from the Vice Principal and, en route to the school, the Principal phoned to say we were not needed. When we negotiated a return and a meeting with the Principal, we discovered a person with deep past traumas reactivated by the bombing. These reactions were producing attitudes and divisions that were causing major splits in the staff team who were desperate for assistance. Reactivation of hidden events, often from long ago and related to the 'Troubles', occurred with several Principals. In one school, we were met with a sullen silence from staff that required a lot of internal processing by ourselves to manage. We offered sessions for individuals and during one of these, we were given information that helped us understand the roots of the resistance. A tragedy closer to home had occurred three months before and the repercussions were still unfolding. A pupil was one of two young people in custody accused of assisting an adult in the torture and murder of a pregnant teenager. The impact of this trauma, more personal to the school than the impact of the bomb, appeared to be blocking any work on the bomb and needed to be dealt with first.

The benefits of action research in this phase of the task were harvested mainly by my team and our closest allies in the wider response. We could not have been so responsive to so many different situations without it. The sessions repeated in such different schools provided us with divergent opportunities to test out and refine existing ideas. In a prepared, organised system, the information gained could have been collected and processed by the senior management team and used to inform decisions and services that in turn could have helped the schools more. Key personnel in each school could have formed supported collaborative enquiry groups for greater learning from each other.

Two schools did take up the opportunity for further work with us. This work led to two long-term contracts with spin-offs into the communities they served and other professional agencies at a local, regional and national level. Our work in one school is the source for the story in section E3. Suffice to say here that with the pulsed programme of work, we were able to set in motion cycles of action research with staff teams and supporting professionals which ranged over many of Torbert's '27 domains of action inquiry' (Chandler & Torbert, 2003). We used dialogue with individuals in the process of establishing needs and gaining entry to the contracts and mapping techniques to process the history of the teams and the disaster experience. Team enquiries, often using group sculpting, were used to expose current issues. In addition group sessions for managers helped clarify the context of the schools and gave opportunities to gently process their disaster reactions with the hope that they would make less reactive and more rational decisions based on good information. As the contracts proceeded, wider networks were created for multi-way information exchange with parents, other professionals and key parts of the community. Once current problems had been managed, and as the contracts drew to an end, we created exercises with the staff teams to envision the future and look at how they could realise their dreams. Finally, attention was given to the wider system (the Education Board in one case, and a Health Board in the other) by involving key managers in mapping the 'journeys' they and their staff had taken since the bomb. The maps were then used to investigate how the learning could be taken into the future, in one case, via the Unions, into schools at a national level.

Thirdly, as we moved around the organisation, we acted as **problem-solving consultants** for professionals with specific issues that had emerged. Many of these presented new situations for ourselves, so we had to employ **dialogue** techniques for joint exploration of the issue, using organisational and disaster recovery principals as a check against which the person could find their solutions. Youth workers for example were being bombarded with invitations from well-meaning groups in England and elsewhere to take groups of bereaved and injured children for a holiday, as illustrated in the story in Story Box 24.

A similar approach was used to help the Chief Executive deal with the 'walk-about' by President Clinton and a large entourage of UK and US dignitaries, a time consuming task that took him away from other duties. The organisers had asked him to select school-children to line the route. We provided the expertise that took away his stress

**STORY BOX 24****REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE: TURNING MINEFIELDS INTO GOLD MINES**

*“Such trips to strange families and places, packed full of free gifts and high profile meetings with dignitaries (including a visit to Downing Street to meet the Prime Minister) had the potential to create more personal stress and jealousies with siblings and friends and more work for the already overwhelmed youth workers. But they were publicly offered and difficult to refuse. Together, we were able to look at the different options and consequences, then work out an action plan, bearing in mind our principle that, for any issue, it is possible to anticipate likely problems, take action to prevent them, manage the task, then review and deal with any consequences. Having this kind of structure meant that feelings of helplessness and despair could be transformed into guided reflection and action throughout the whole process, even if problems arose. Eventually, the trip went ahead. Problems did arise on the journey, but they were handled calmly, not reactively, and parents reported that their children were more confident and had made new friends as a result. The trip acted not just as a distraction from the heaviness at home but also as a bridge to the world beyond the disaster. The youth workers acknowledged that our problem-solving dialogues had given them the confidence to go ahead with the trips.”*

- Taken from field records, 1998

and helped him take action to ensure the children chosen were well supported during the visit and teachers could deal with the jealousies of those not chosen.

**Phase 5: Consolidating the work and reviewing the next paths.**

This was the aspect of the work where the lack of a systematic, pre-planned response meant that we could not use useful action research methods to review the work at the end of the first visit to Omagh to plan the next stage in a meaningful way with all parties. We were however, able to build this into our subsequent contracts with other Boards, making use of collaborative mapping of the process from which action planning for the future could proceed.

In the first contract we had to resort to creating and taking spontaneous opportunities to ensure the threads of the embryonic work were not lost. In addition to the methods of persuasion to keep the contract alive, described earlier in this section, I used action inquiry to attend to many levels (personal, interpersonal and strategic) so I could use the present as a step to the future. In the sensitive post-disaster atmosphere,

spontaneously created moments like these have two advantages. First, defensive reactions are reduced and second, overburdened professionals have to make no effort to make contact. An example occurred during the long wait for President Clinton to arrive. I was present to support staff and children, but I saw the opportunity to consolidate relationships already made in the earlier sessions. Some Principals had hinted at wanting further support but had not yet contacted us. I was aware of their work pressures and chasing them too much would have been counterproductive. Here we had the chance to bump into each other while sharing the common experience of waiting endlessly for the President. In this way the work in the school in County Donegal was consolidated, without which all the subsequent work influencing the community, the Health Board and, through the Unions, the Irish schools (Capewell, 2000a) would not have happened.

My awareness of the need for multiple loop action alerted me to the need for the two schools from different Education Authorities to have their longer-term response managed within their own system, especially as their direct managers were becoming part of their problems. This also gave me leverage for staying within the work, even if the first contract ended prematurely, as I suspected it might. By staying in tune with the process, I was ready to introduce the logical arguments and practical steps required for this to happen as soon as the Principals began to realise and mention the need themselves.

### **SPHERE 3: MANAGING CONTEXTS**

Managing each community context of the disaster involved two core convictions from all my previous experience. First, that individual recovery cannot be isolated from wider social, political and economic contexts. Second, that communities can only be reached via individuals and agencies of which the communities are composed. I needed methods that enabled me to research and respond rapidly to the whole and the parts. Techniques described in section B4, such as the Yoga of Participation, the use of metaphor and making symbolic representations of what I hear and feel about a context allowed information to surface quickly, though tentatively. Refinements were made as more information was gained. I also used the models of Schein (1985) and Hawkins (learnt from consultancy sessions and working alongside him) that ensured I drew conclusions about the culture of different contexts from five sources (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000: 169) – the visible artefacts, behavioural patterns and norms, mindsets

that show how the world is viewed, the emotional ground that shapes meaning, and the motivational roots behind aspirations and choices. I added these to the factual data and maps I drew about all aspects of the community in its disaster and pre-disaster state.

### **Boundaries between different contexts**

During my post-bomb work, I sometimes had separate contracts for work in different contexts, such as a school or with community forum, but this was not always so. At other times, I had to take care to remember the differences between, for example, general community settings or a work-place setting, where managers had a duty of care to staff and staff had a right to personal privacy. Working in the public sector required an awareness of slow decision making processes, involving community representatives and committees, and of the duty of care to the people in the community they were serving. Schools were particularly complex contexts in which many boundaries and sensitivities had to be remembered and managed. For example, in one school, the duty of care to staff conflicted with the wish of a minority to deny the impact of the bomb on themselves and the school. This conflicted with the need of the school team to support each other and to provide a strong support system for teaching children who were severely affected by the bomb. The private denial then imposed denial on the rest of the school community, thus threatening the healthy recovery of the school community and individuals. I was also working with schools with different management systems, schools managed by three different agencies, two town communities and schools in different countries with different education and political systems, plus several village and Townland<sup>1</sup> communities.

### **Wider social and political contexts**

Behind all these specific and local contexts, I had to retain an awareness of the wider social and political context, especially the sectarian history of Northern Ireland which gave rise to current sensitivities around language and place and personal names. The political context accounted for the incident itself and the significance of its timing that caused such a loss of hope. In the same way that these wider contexts affected the daily lives and identity of people and communities we worked with, how we could practise in different places was affected by the fact that people from different traditions used different churches, GP services, schools and community facilities.

Gender was another aspect of the wider social context that affected how we were perceived and what we did. This part of Northern Ireland still operated in a patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> Townlands, the smallest local political unit in Ireland, inspire a strong sense of belonging.

manner in many places, though we also discovered strong feminist activism in some community groups and amongst some Catholic nuns. However, many women we worked with still felt their voices were not heard and they were quite fearful of challenging male authority figures at work and home. Being a female consultant meant I could be dismissed as an irrelevant, powerless female by some people, but to others, especially when our power was felt, we became the personification of many negative projections about women. It did mean that I had easy access to grass-roots, mainly female, networks. Gender issues were present at the heart of our operation - the clerical staff working for us were all female and referred to as 'the girls' while managers were, with a very few exceptions, were male and referred to as 'Mr...'. We asked the women if they had noticed this and they replied, "*Oh yes, but we are allowed to call them by their Christian names at Christmas*", as if this made it acceptable. We knew our questions were raising gender awareness and that our presence might be seen as a threat to the established order. With some managers, this was happening already, judging by how consciously we had to avoid falling into gender traps.

#### **Reaching the hidden parts of the context.**

Given the complexity of the situation, action research provided the philosophical framework for our wish to include voices from as many of these contexts as possible, especially those that might be hidden or ignored. I chose to have our "*ears opened to testimonies of real survivors*" and to pierce the "*silences that underpin disaster work ...to suit other, often hidden, agenda.*" (Hewitt, 1995:326-7) so that I could channel these back to decision makers to inform their actions. To do this we encouraged teachers to attend to every pupil in their classes by using the class triage exercise, and in the community it was done by creating 'agents of recovery' in agencies that reached into the heart of the system, such as schools, youth clubs, libraries and community groups.

We discovered that certain groups and issues were given a great deal of attention, while others had little. Children in many schools had their 'disaster' voices denied and we noticed that more attention seemed to be given to secondary schools than to primary and special schools. In one primary school, therapeutic help was offered to two girls, but not an equally affected younger boy. Villages outside Omagh also felt unheard and transport problems meant that support services were difficult to reach. Adolescents' needs were particularly difficult to represent. To reach them, we advocated more support for youth workers who were in a strategic position, for example, to take immediate action if suicide was threatened. Our suggestion to appoint

an extra outreach youth worker was met with the comment, “*but they are only a small section of the community*”. We argued that their reactions and behaviour could cause far greater distress in families and the community than their numbers warranted. After much delay, an appointment was made a year later.

### **Reaching the community through informal sources.**

Though our outreach was done mainly through the agency of others, we made every effort to hear stories directly from local people. Wherever we went, I was surprised how freely people talked about their experiences and I also became aware that the surface only had to be scratched a little by saying who we were for many levels of traumatic experience from thirty years of civil unrest to be exposed. Our sources also included people with their ear to the ground, such as cleaners and secretaries in schools, staff in hotels and libraries, people we met in pubs, churches, clubs, shops and leisure places. One conversation struck up in a shop brought to my attention the needs of young people who had lost friends in the bomb and were about to leave home for University in other parts of the UK where the bomb had already become old news. I was reminded of the stress in our family when my daughter left for University four days after her sister's funeral. As a result, I wrote a leaflet, ‘*Guidelines for school leavers going to University*’, which was sent to all schools for distribution. I also contacted the Times Higher Education Supplement who, after strong advocacy, agreed to publish an article (THES, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1998) for the information of institutions receiving students.

The staff I regularly met at the small hotel where I stayed became a regular source of local stories, including those from the business community since the proprietor was Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. This hotel also attracted professionals doing bomb-related work, especially women, and our visits coincided often enough for an informal enquiry and support group to form over breakfast and dinner over the first year. I thus heard stories from journalists and the makers of TV documentaries who became ‘counsellors’ to many families of the dead and injured who had not yet sought professional support. I gave information and support to help her in this task.

With all these informal channels, I aimed to gain information, but also give information, support and ideas to encourage and inform survivors and the general community. Much of the work involved countering the hierarchy of suffering that was so prominent and reversing the rumours and voyeuristic stories that were spreading fast with positive messages.

### **Reaching the community through formal channels**

I also took action to influence the community using formal channels. One was to persuade local newspapers to print 'coping tips' for parents, carers, and children themselves' that could reach many people and be cut out and kept for reference. Another was giving information and ideas to the Library Service and Omagh District Council Community Department to create the atmosphere for community generated 'healing activities' to emerge. I cannot tell whether our ideas sparked off the ones that arose in Omagh, such as the pulping of flowers laid in the street for various arts projects, but it may have helped them to be officially accepted. A senior Librarian spoke of her idea for an Oral Archive in the first weeks after the bomb when others were wary of doing so. Believing that such immediate oral history "*born at the moment of disaster and of collective social forgetfulness*" (Meyer et al, 1988: 15) can counter media and official distortions of real stories, I used my experience from Hungerford to provide a cognitive framework for why this would be a useful action. I also connected them to the UK Library Association disaster expert (and former Hungerford Librarian). A plan of action for starting an archive resulted. I also wrote a '*Handbook for Listeners*' (Capewell, 1988) to protect those hearing emotional stories and the members of the community telling them, maybe for the first time. Three years later, I received a CD-Rom, '*One Day in August*' (the Omagh Bomb Archive, 2001) which was the result of a Library instigated and community managed project. Thus the Library produced a platform for anyone to tell their stories, a safe forum for emotional expression and social contact that gave some a social purpose. It was a comprehensive community record of the disaster. Libraries also provided space for other forms of expression, such as arts projects. Their services provided both information that anyone could access and a listening ear in a friendly place that carried no stigma about receiving help.



### The bomb context

While in Omagh, I was totally immersed in the bomb. On one occasion, I was a participator in events and this provided an insight into the post-bomb context of the community. In the example given in Story Box 25 about a hoax bomb scare I show how I automatically went into 'action researcher' mode and also turned my reflections into action and an opportunity for more 'recovery' work.

#### STORY BOX 25

##### THE HOAX: LEARNING THROUGH LIVING IN AN EXPERIENCE

*"I had just started eating Sunday lunch in a café in the centre of Omagh when a police officer rushed in, telling us to leave immediately because of a bomb scare. I started observing my reactions and those of others. As we ran through the kitchens, I noticed all the staff had left, unlike their actions in the bomb warning three weeks before. I noticed my annoyance at leaving my lunch and remembered my work in a restaurant chain where customers carried on eating during raids. I was particularly cross that this was my day off. I watched as frustration began to be tinged with fear and denial that it was a real bomb. We stood outside in the rain and cold, our coats and belongings in the buildings and cars, wondering where to stand and who to believe. (In the real bomb, people had been directed to the site of the bomb.) The groups of shivering people nervously discussed the merits of standing in different places, while some showed off their knowledge –raised windscreen wipers meant that a car had been checked. Watching the reactions of young shop assistants, I realised their raw memories of the bomb were being reactivated, so I checked if this was so and offered support. As we waited and waited, my frustration grew at the absence of information and action. I decided to mobilise action, first by asking the police officers if they had blankets for the shivering young girls (they did not) and then by repeating like a broken record that we needed shelter until we could collect our belongings and staff could close their premises. Eventually it worked and the Police arranged for a Hotel manager to take us to his home while we awaited instructions. By this time the group was bonding into a 'survivor group' – though the camaraderie was muted with the memories of three weeks before. While at his home, the hotelier told me his bomb story and the story of his previous traumas, including the recent suicide of his brother. After four hours, we were able to go back into the town, exhausted and with the knowledge that few are interested in the disruption caused by a hoax. Hoaxes continued to be a major drain on the community for two years.*

*– Taken from my records, 1998*

The only other means of gaining deeper understandings of real-life situations of greater severity than the hoax was by hearing individual and group stories directly. On another occasion, when I worked directly with one school staff team, I learnt that assumptions could easily be made about the disruptions to an organisation or community. On the surface, the context of their bomb story was a little more complex than most incidents affecting a school, as their involvement was indirect. The coach trip that took some of their pupils into Omagh and the heart of the bombing because of an unplanned diversion had been organised by the local Language School with whom the school had close links. Families of school pupils hosted the Spanish students and their teacher was assisting at the school. It was not until the staff were brought together several months after the bomb and began to map their involvement that anyone, including the staff members involved, had any idea of the extent of their total experience. Vicariously, we became witnesses to the horror of their stories. They had dealt with uncertainty, rushing from hospital to hospital and making desperate phone calls while trying to locate the dead and injured children; the awfulness of breaking news to parents; meeting the returning uninjured, but traumatised, children; and the horror of accompanying shocked parents in the reception centre and then on the long walk down a corridor to the mortuary to identify a body. Then they had to return home to deal with the reactions of the community, visits by dignitaries and media demands. All this was in addition to dealing with their own reactions and those of their school community as well as preparing as usual for the new school term.

### **Conclusion**

In the short and long-term response to the Omagh bomb, action research was therefore crucial to my role and task as a practitioner working in far from ideal circumstances in a situation with many unknowns, uncertainties and emerging twists and turns. Without its approach and methods, I could not have gained my initial entry, established a presence and worked with so many variables and contexts. It helped myself and my associates walk alongside key parts of several communities to help them process the experience of the bomb, pick up threads from the past and weave them into their future. Action research enabled me to take care of myself and team, using our bodies, skills and past and present experiences as resources for our practice so that we could adapt general post-trauma methods to specific situations and contexts. It allowed us to act as conduits for a great deal of information and encouraged us to listen to diverse voices and watch for hidden or missing agenda. Importantly, it gave us a firm vehicle for an uncertain journey and made us pay

attention to feedback and quality issues as an integral part of our practice so that it could be refined as we made our path.

Conditions were far from ideal and people and agencies were free to choose whether they accepted, adapted or discarded our recommendations. Many who were willing participants with us found us valuable companions and life-lines through their time of greatest need. A great deal of enquiry was stimulated at local to national level by our presence and work. We achieved our aims of pouring information, support, questions and ideas into frozen and distressed systems to get them moving again. I believe we were a small but important cog that got people and systems moving towards recovery in the early aftermath of the bomb. We continued to have an influence in keeping the momentum of the recovery work going in several places and this has helped the long-term recovery process to be continued in a journey that is on-going in Omagh and affected areas beyond.

## E 3

**A 'MESSY' ACTION RESEARCH STORY:**  
**"WHEN A WOMAN SPOKE FOR HERSELF..."**

*"One group of oral historians asserts: When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities... new perspectives emerge that challenge the truth of official accounts and... existing theories"*

– Hewitt 1995: 329

This is an account of work that arose during my first contract in the aftermath of the Omagh bomb. I present this story as the type of action research strategy that is possible in the vulnerable atmosphere of disaster response and adjustment. It shows the messiness of real-life action research with its complex web of interacting first, second and third person enquiry using the different forms of knowledge available to me. In my explorations, I delved into the past to inform my research in the present in order to help people research and create their own visions for the future.

It is also a story of the courage and persistence of a small number of community leaders and local professionals, facilitated by myself and three associates (working at different times), to ensure that children distressed by this and other traumatic incidents received informed, skilled help from significant adults in their lives, such as teachers and clergy. To do this, some of their teachers recognised they first had to cope with their own distress and the distress of the staff team and whole school community. Bringing this about required a hard struggle with denial, inefficiency, ignorance, sabotage, power struggles and resistance at personal, social and institutional levels. It involved the issue of how to reach silent and silenced groups such as women, children and isolated communities, as well as those who silenced themselves for fear of being seen as weak. We aimed to pay attention to family and community contexts and reach out across bridges of communication and support rather than just focussing on individual pathology and treatment. The hope of the story is that working with the resistance we encountered in systems, rather than being defeated by it, created opportunities for learning and change in the way schools in general in the region could be supported after future disasters.

The story is an adaptation of a paper I presented at the Conference of the International Society of Health and Human Rights, Dubrovnik, Croatia, July 2001 as part of my commitment to third-person action. Real names have been changed and only selected details have been included because of the sensitivity of the material. Deciding how to retain the messy reality of the story without confusing the reader has been a challenge and I have placed sign-posts as guides along the way.

**How the story began to unfold: The first meeting.**

The story began when a distraught woman, who I shall call 'Dara', came to see me and my colleague, Sue during one of our open 'surgeries' for teachers during our first visit to Omagh. She had contacted a staff welfare officer who knew me from my work in Derry schools and he directed her to our sessions. 'Dara' had just become Acting Principal of a Primary School of just 70 children, in another Education Board's area. The school served a scattered rural community in a remote border area some distance from Omagh. 'Dara' was angry because an administrative oversight had meant she had not received the information packs sent to schools about our work and meetings:

*"Dara spent over an hour with us. Her story was a distressed scramble of facts, emotions and opinions. She rushed at high speed into a detailed story about funding for a project that seemed irrelevant until we discovered the project was the brainchild of a volunteer helper at the school, and mother of three pupils, who had been killed in the bombing."*

- Taken from field notes, 1998

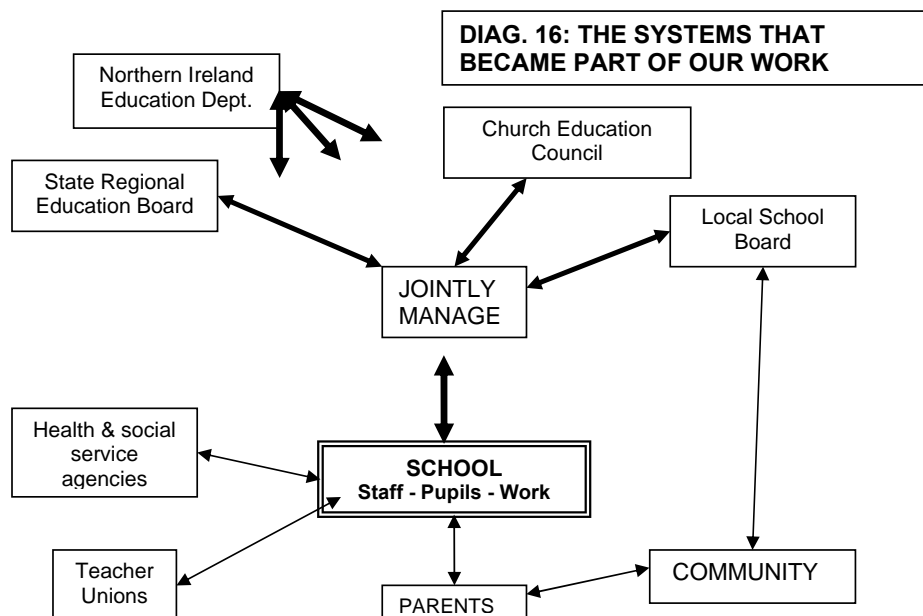
A stream of distress flowed from 'Dara' about the visits that had been made to the school as a result of the bomb by various school managers at the start of term. The school was so remote, they rarely had visitors and she had felt oppressed by the heavy-handed manner of these male managers 'hunting in packs of four' with little empathy for the impact of the bomb on her and the school. Being in an emotional state, she expressed her anger to them. They had little knowledge of disaster impact or how to respond except by labelling 'Dara' as 'the problem'. The managers returned 'Dara's' anger back to her, mirroring my own experience with managers at Hungerford (Capewell, 1993a) and also Sue's experiences with managers elsewhere. We both had to employ action inquiry methods to distance our personal experiences from those of 'Dara' without losing the empathy and understanding I had for her. Our recognition of her story and her position calmed her down. She felt heard and affirmed and wanted to

continue contact with us. Because of our heavy work-load in Omagh we promised to do so by phone and hoped we could meet her again if the contract was extended.

In the mean-time, Sue and I had to do our own co-enquiry work to defuse our own re-stimulated reactions concerning the attitudes of her managers. We then worked in partnership with my 'internal ally', the welfare officer, to explore options to deal with the fact that the organisational systems the school belonged to were a major part of the problem and her distress, and therefore had to be part of the solution. We kept in touch with 'Dara' by phone and brief meetings in Omagh and at her home, gaining more information on the way. We alerted key local professionals about issues being faced by the school, without breaking personal confidentiality. As we learnt more about the school's needs, the degree of the impact on the school emerged and our determination to get help to the school was fuelled.

### Assessing the organisational context and advocating their support

Sue, the Welfare Officer and I explored the issues, concluding that the denial of needs was a constant theme. In a later cycle of reflection, Cohen's analysis helped me understand that denial had occurred at several levels: denial of impact, interpretation and implication. It was more potent when it occurred as a collective act by public institutions (Cohen, 2001). No one had had the capacity to hear the school's distress about the bomb and other issues. Our first task was thus to understand the system (Diag. 16) in which the school was embedded and which was denying its needs.



Once we had a grasp of the school's complex organisational system, we then had to make a case for gaining permission and funds to work with the school to assess its needs properly. The school's management system was top-heavy for such a small school, being overseen by three Boards representing the Catholic Church, the State and the local community. We discovered that three Boards had never met together before to clarify areas of responsibility for the school. Boundaries were confused and no one was sure about who would fund our work – one Board covered staff training, another staff welfare and the third made local management decisions. Any work we might do would bridge all three.

We began to make contacts through our internal agents and allies and, thus our work moved from a personal dialogue to engagement with wider systems and broadened to reach out to the community system that the school served. Local community based officials were particularly quick to learn and realised how they had contributed to the school's problems. They were influential in persuading other parts of the system to fund our work, though this was still not achieved until four months after the bomb. We finally managed to gain a one-day session with the staff and insisted on having another day-long meeting with officers from the school's three managing bodies. Most importantly, the school's own Education Board was now funding the work and taking its proper responsibility for the school rather than the adjacent Board who had at first taken control of the whole disaster response effort.

**The first sessions – creating a network of support, assessing the impact and needs.**

One of our most important actions was to bring people from the three managing bodies together for the first time ever, thus crossing religious and political divisions. We designed the meeting so that they got to know each other first as *'human beings affected by the bomb'*, not as *'roles with positions to defend'*. By sharing their own stories of the impact on themselves, they became united in a common human bond that transcended other differences at least long enough for them to agree on a way forward. Only then did we have any hope of mediating the many conflicts we knew existed within and between these agencies that would impinge on our work in the school. It was also a gentle means of helping them acknowledge and defuse the personal impact of the bomb on themselves.

We began in a similar way with the staff team, allowing staff to say as much or as little as they wished. It quickly became apparent that the impact was deeper than anyone

had so far appreciated. The hierarchy of suffering was operating and 'near misses' and a teacher whose child had been injured had kept their experiences hidden. Therefore, as well as using the session for giving basic information and problem-solving, we asked for their participation in a collaborative assessment of the full impact and needs. From our dialogues, we listed all the traumatic events experienced by the school community and sought detailed information about the Townland community that the school served to determine the full significance of events. Our findings became our main tool of advocacy for a longer programme of support. This is what emerged:

### **The impact of the Omagh bomb at first sight**

In the explosion, three young pupils under seven had lost their mother, baby sister, grandmother and twin sisters (due to be born two months later). The mother had also been a volunteer helper at the school, an important member of the school's 'women's group', and a leading campaigner for a school nursery. The staff had thus lost a colleague, a personal and family friend, while the community had lost a powerful voice. The ripples of loss (circles of vulnerability) spread through the school as many pupils were first cousins, distant relatives or friends of the victims and bereaved. Identification stress was present for the teacher on Maternity leave who was a friend of the dead mother. Their babies had been due at the same time.

Apart from these obvious bomb-related losses, a further catalogue of loss and trauma impinging on the school community emerged which contributed to the stress:

### **Past traumatic events**

- ☞ 'Troubles' related events: fatal booby-trap bombs and shootings involving staff and school Governors. In one incident, a staff member had lost 3 family members and an unborn child and this meant she particularly identified with the latest losses.
- ☞ In the previous year, several local traumatic deaths had occurred, including two youth suicides and accidental deaths of children.

### **Current traumatic incidents not related to the bomb**

- ☞ Stressful events leading up to the death 5 weeks after the bomb of one of two pupils in the same class who had leukaemia. The dead pupil's father was also a school Governor who was involved in decision making about the response to the bomb. This death created more direct distress in the school as a whole than the distress of the bomb.



- ⇒ The stress of teaching itself, staff changes and managing family life. Several staff members had very large families, whose members were also affected by these incidents.
- ⇒ The on-going tensions of civil unrest and an uneasy Peace, which give an added dimension not found in other disasters. This type of trauma is collective, more public and means that politics invades all parts of life and has the potential to divide communities.

#### **Post-bomb traumatic incidents which emerged**

- ⇒ Over the next two years, progress in our programme was complicated by two deaths of young people in road accidents. In each case, the victim was related to, or a family friend of, members of staff.
- ⇒ The staff also had immense fears about their first major school inspection which could happen at any time in the year after the bomb. This would involve a great increase in work at a time when everyone was exhausted and vulnerable. It was a symbol of an uncaring educational system to the staff.

I knew that the previous and current stresses would have an influence on perceptions and coping capacities in those in the school and community affected by them and those available for support who made up the recovery environment. Current and perceived future stresses might also drain the staff team's available energy for dealing with the bomb. I therefore as a matter of urgency wrote a report of these assessments and put forward a proposal through the relevant agency for a programme of follow-up work to support the school until the second anniversary of the bomb.

#### **The next stage of advocacy and persuasion for a follow-up programme**

It might be imagined that even the first list of losses above would warrant a speedy, adequately funded response, especially as the Secretary of State for Education, Dr Mo Mowlam, had promised that money should be no barrier to such work. This was not the case and this brief account can never communicate adequately the full nature of what was involved for ourselves and the local 'agents of recovery' who lived this process of advocacy to get help for this school. The longer it took, the more the stresses and repercussions accumulated. Eventually, after another five months permission for the follow-up programme was obtained. I received no remuneration for all the hours of support, information giving and advocacy involved in this process, I was driven by my concern for people and social justice, but I also suspect it gave purpose to my process of learning and recovery from the Hungerford experience.

I shall attempt to give a glimpse of this long journey with its tasks of advocacy and mediation; persuasion and education to counter denial, resistance and misuse of power. We were not doing this alone as we had recruited key active allies and co-researchers. I gained many insights from e-mails sent to me by some of these allies, though I had to take care not to get embroiled in the gossip and local inter-personal conflicts that were sometimes told to me in minute detail, too tedious to reproduce here. I found, and still find, the delays we encountered unbelievable, yet they were not uncommon as the Principal of another school badly affected by the bomb in another Education authority went through a similar stressful process. I shall never know the full story behind the delays, but I think it vital that these issues are explored in spite of the difficulties of doing so because of the risk of identification of individuals. Some possibilities for the delays emerged from the e-mails:

*"I can see 'politics' becoming involved here. I can't say for sure, but I am strongly of the opinion that the Education and Library Board A don't want to be embarrassed by the Education and Library Board B doing things when they are not....."*

- e-mail from a local ally, Nov 1998

This referred to the fact that the original Board overseeing the bomb response had felt they should be doing the work and had not appreciated the importance of the Managers who were creating the problems needed to be part of the solution. There may also have been guilt about the fact that the Board had failed to get information to the school.

**Denial** of course is another likely reason for the delays. I have explored resistance and denial in previous disasters and in relation to the Northern Ireland situation. Smyth has commented on the use of denial as a coping strategy during 'the Troubles' (Smyth, 1998). The Education system, as part of the social system, would also be caught up in this and helped turn private denial into its most damaging form of collective denial (Cohen, 2001). Dealing positively with this denial took up much of our time and personal energy, yet by engaging with it and offering rational challenges to it in our conversations, we were able to bring about some changes with some people from local to national levels.

Evidence from e-mails backed our tacit feelings that **power games** and **sabotage** were other factors in the delay. Some officials were translating personal issues into delaying

tactics, passively by failing to attend meetings or fulfil obligations and promises, and actively through destructive behaviour. In one case, an official (X) initially gave very active support for our work. However, we discovered he was aggressively usurping the power of a key lay manager (Y) who was new to the post. Once Y fully understood his role and what was happening, he took on his responsibility and power. The 'pretender', X, was deposed, whereupon he replaced his support for our work by denial that it was needed and, thereafter, actively engaged in behaviour equal to that of a revengeful, defeated child. He began by attacking the integrity of lay and statutory officials until finally we, as external consultants, were targeted with attacks on our professional integrity, skill and fees. My colleague at the time, Lilian, shared her insight into X's behaviour, discerning that he was, *"a man who would be totally supportive only as long as it served his own purpose, then he would destroy"*. Further proof came in a series of e-mails sent to me by another manager before the main programme was agreed:

*"Were person X other than the person I discern him to be, I might not need to prepare as thoroughly as I feel obliged to. It appears that X might have little conscience about abandoning the school and its needs when he might have to sacrifice his own convenience... I feel an urgency to focus the proposals both in terms of what is proposed and in terms of who has responsibility.... I fear that X's unconscious may thwart good intentions to de-rail proposals at a later juncture" - 30.11.98*

Person Y e-mailed again while still awaiting a decision about funding:

*"X knew about the meeting about the proposals but he didn't turn up ...afterwards, he denied all knowledge of it. His colleague says this is typical and he may be 'miffed' that I had taken his provision of a part-time extra teacher and turned it into a full-time extra teacher. X was complaining that other people were 'doing his work'. I think the Santa Claus outfit is rattling about in his wardrobe! He wants to get out and give out the lollipops. He'll rage when he feels that people are denting his image and 'going behind his back"*  
- 18.02.99

The next month I received another e-mail showing how the attacks from X had been diverted to attacks on me. He had attempted to reduce my proposal significantly and had queried a minor element on my invoice, in spite of his previous assertions that I charged too little for what we did:

*“Our meeting with X was ‘all over the place’, and... he said there were ‘political’ problems on two levels. First, with regard to yourself: there would be some who would say that you are promoting yourself. I know this must be hurtful for you. However, I want you to know that I do not subscribe to that view. And even if you were, some people said: well, you do the business that we need. I was at pains to point out to X that, as far as I am concerned, your input into this process is non-negotiable.”*

The e-mails gave me insights, usually difficult to obtain, into micro decision-making processes after disaster. They backed my intuitive knowing that the help this school was going to get rested largely on internal politics and personalities, not a systematic and informed assessment of need. Somewhere, sight had been lost of what was at stake - the support of young children with multiple loss and their carers, all distressed by a major atrocity. It also confirmed that external consultants serve a useful purpose after disaster because they are outside these organisational squabbles.

In spite of all the problems we all faced, there were enough **positive forces** present to counter the institutional denial. My team’s presence was a major catalytic force in facilitating and linking up our courageous local community allies to overcome the resistance. Their support kept us going, along with our own commitment to this work in general and the school in particular. Eventually, funding was gained to continue the work until June 2000.

### **The Long-term Programme**

Once the long-term programme had been agreed, many of the earlier problems fell away. The programme was composed of termly problem-solving and training sessions for the staff team and a day working in the school to help staff put their learning into practice by acting as on-the-job mentors and by modelling creative work with children. Being a small school, the children got to know us, helped by our willingness to play football and learn Irish dancing with them in the playground. The staff and children became important ‘community agents’ in reaching out into the community through the school.

Other community members were receptive to our style of work because we entered the community as human beings first, and then as people with expertise to offer, but not impose. More allies were recruited in the process. The Chair of the School Board

quickly learned and took on his power to move us astutely through the bureaucratic minefield. He kept faith in our work when it was being undermined and when the process of recovery itself threw up the occasional, but potentially destructive, negative projections.

The work moved out to influence the local community through the Board of School Governors, composed mainly of parents and community leaders such as one of the Parish priests. We had group 'question and answer' sessions with them and invited them to become our 'agents'. Several consulted us on their past traumas (usually 'Troubles' related) that had been reactivated by the bombing. The local Catholic priest even integrated the BE FIT & Phys. multi-dimensional coping model into his Sunday sermon. As a result, parents were encouraged to attend an evening session with us at the school and several came back to see us on an individual basis. Some of the school staff also became 'agents of learning' in the community and so too did some of the school children. In spite of the fears of people who had not met us that we, as English 'experts', would never be accepted, we experienced great friendship and willingness to have our offers of help considered. This meant we could use spontaneous moments to chat to people and use the time productively, as this instance shows:

*"I was driving past the house of a woman who had been at the parents' meeting. She waved and I stopped to ask how she was coping herself and with her cousin's three young bereaved children, as well as her own. Her worries spilled out, especially about the content of the children's play at the weekend. They had played 'burials', making a large grave out of sand with flowers from the garden on top. She had wanted to stop the bereaved father from seeing it, but couldn't. The children had run up to him and took him to see their handiwork. He had taken it all in his stride but she was still worried that their play and behaviour might be harmful and abnormal.*

*I wanted to do more than just 'make her feel better', so I set up an enquiring dialogue to expose the thinking and theory behind my questions (this gave me time to think too). In this way we became partners in our collaborative enquiry into her question. We realised that the children were not distressed in their play and were light and happy afterwards, especially when they could show off their efforts to the father. I was able to affirm her natural skills as a parent, but also pass on tips that would help her assess when she needed to be worried and get expert help."*

This story also showed how work at one level (the individual) had been made possible because of work at other levels (individual, then group, organisational and community). What also helped was the friendliness of the children towards us when we worked in the school and they had been the gatekeepers who made us acceptable to adults.

I worked with the school between visits, undertaking problem-solving by phone and e-mail. This kept me in touch with the everyday dilemmas facing staff and meant they did not feel abandoned each time we left. At times, staff became overwhelmed with their own reactions, the marginalisation of teachers by other professionals, and especially by the children's reactions and behaviour. As one wrote:

*"My problem is that [bereaved child]'s work and behaviour has changed. The child minder will need help with this too. I suspect that all is not well in the home situation. Her work is slipping and her mind is distracted. She's being rebellious in unusual way as if she is saying, "Punish me! I want to feel bad!" There's a whole class discipline problem as a spin off from all this.' I feel guilty about keeping firm discipline because of what she has been through. The other girl's problems come out as aches and pains and feeling sick, but she is less clinging than at first." - e-mail, 1999*

Teachers were confused about how to balance individual and whole class needs, and how to assess whether behaviour changes were due to the bomb, the other pupil death or something entirely different. Increasing anxiety was causing the staff to be over-attentive to every detail of the children's behaviour. This kind of information helped me prepare relevant material for the next session to back my brief e-mail replies.

Because my other networks, I could also initiate some mediation with other agencies in Omagh, though not always with success. For example, some conflicts arose because of the hierarchical, non-consultative styles in which other support agencies approached the school and bereaved children. These agencies only appeared once we had alerted them to needs in the school, yet seemed to be jealous of our presence and declined our offer for a joint meeting about creating a consistent network of care between all the carers of the bereaved children, a key feature of work with children advocated by Gordon & Wraith (1993). For example, a professional tried to impose art therapy on two (but not the third) of the bereaved children without seeing them or their father first to assess their individual and family needs. The school did not have space for therapeutic

work. The staff also felt the children did not need to be made to feel even more different from the rest. The school and family found the agency approaches oppressive and disempowering. They felt blamed when they rejected their offers of help.

Jealousy of my team by other services became a common problem and sometimes this was not helped by the school's teachers being enthusiastic about our work. As one e-mail from a teacher informed us:

*"[An Advisor] has asked me to find out all I can about Sand Therapy. The answer I got from the Trauma Centre was, "We don't know!" They say that this is all a learning experience for them. When I invited a therapist and social worker from the Trauma Centre, I told her, 'One thing has got to me: how little the trauma centre knows about trauma! There appears to be no one more capable than Elizabeth Capewell is."*

In this case, I ensured that I made personal contact with the people involved to preempt any problems. This raised dilemmas about quality issues. I felt a double-bind between being seen to be effective and causing jealousy, and not being seen to be effective and being rubbished. It contrasted with the comments of a senior officer in Omagh when the local newspaper quoted several school Principals who named us and said how helpful our work had been. The officer remarked that, in his opinion, the best indication of excellence was that no one would know who was responsible, implying that, by being named, we had not met his criteria of excellence.

We ended our school programme with another collaborative exercise. Using the idea of the Trauma Process Map, the staff team drew out their own journey on large sheets of paper, noting key events, what helped and what hindered their progress, how they had changed and how they knew they had changed. From this they worked out plans for the future. Some made good use of the work and a few remained a little sceptical, though these tended to be staff who had not committed themselves fully at the start. One sceptic did, however, acknowledge that her belief in private grief had not been helpful to the whole staff team. There were too many conflicts in the school when we arrived for us to be able to solve them all and some continued long after we left, but the staff survived, kept the school going and came out well in the Ofsted inspection. Once our job of stabilising the school enough for their usual managers and advisors to continue the work, our thoughts could turn to helping the managing Boards to integrate learning into policies and practice at higher organisational levels.

### **Continuing support to our local 'allies'**

As well as supporting the staff directly between visits, we continued to support our allies who had shown the power of their leadership and had supported our work and the recovery of the school community. We helped them resolve the day-to-day interpersonal conflicts that are part and parcel of community and school life but which gain extra meaning with the stresses of a disaster. One person was asked to resolve a conflict within the school and was becoming entangled in the dynamics. The medium of e-mail freed people to be more honest than on the phone, perhaps because they were writing them in the safety of their own homes. Amongst several issues e-mailed to me was this one:

*"Issue 3: A 6 year old boy. [The boy] claimed that the staff at the after-school club wouldn't let him go to the toilet. The father came to the school in confrontational form. [The boy] is always watching the bereaved child. He talks gruesomely about the Omagh bomb: "Would they be roaring, shouting and screaming in the bomb?" He knows he is annoying the bereaved child, yet it doesn't stop him doing it. He knows he attracts Teacher B's attention. He recently asked, "Does the body rot after it goes into the ground?" He searched her face looking for a reaction. Teacher B said, "All these things are rearing their head now, at this distance from the event. My problem is worrying about what's coming next?"*

I dealt with the e-mails by offering overviews and an observer's perspective to the sender, who was astute enough to take note and not get entangled in destructive dynamics. The e-mails gave me evidence of the mechanics of community fragmentation and the repercussions of disaster at an everyday human level.

Other issues concerned the lack of inter-agency co-operation, for example when one of the bereaved children went into hospital. The nursing sister commented to the child, *"Your mammy must be a very busy lady, that she can't come to see you!"* indicating that one service had not communicated to another. The hospital had told 'Dara' she could have been there with the girl as a family friend but an Education official had told her *"it wasn't the role of the teacher to do what the health worker and social worker do"*.



### **Action Review and Learning by the Education Boards**

Two middle managers from different Boards overcame different forms of resistance to become advocates for our work. They also succeeded in gaining agreement for final action review and learning sessions two years after the bomb with the managers from the three school Boards. During these reviews we used a collaborative exploration to create their own post-bomb process map of their two-year journey. A similar exercise had been done with the school team and mapping had been a powerful tool of reflection. In the session with the school Boards, mapping encouraged a high level of frankness about inter-personal conflicts. We were available to offer insights to place theirs in a wider frame of understanding and this in turn fostered resolution. A joint assessment of the current situation was made before reaching a consensus about how to move to the next stage of integrating learning into policy. We used our usual models, such as BE FIT & Phys, to reinforce our original teaching of them and to show how styles of support, coping and management needed to change with the different stages of the post-disaster journey.

Our work was reported in the Belfast Telegraph, but it was difficult to gain feedback about how far the learning was integrated by the Boards. It soon became clear that they had moved on to other more pressing and current issues, while our main allies, the local priest and the staff welfare officer moved to other jobs within a few months of our departure, though they remained in contact and reported that they continued to use their learning in their new posts. We did have some feedback from individual officers who felt they had learned a great deal. One told us our work had helped when her mother died and that as a result of her personal experience of grief she was now able to appreciate the difficulties and behaviour of the school staff team after the bomb.

### **In Conclusion**

'Dara', the woman who could not hide her rage, brought meaning to the lines I remember from a long forgotten source: "*When a woman tells her truth, the world splits asunder*". Her 'truth' had challenged community, church and statutory systems. The status quo cracked but out of the cracks pathways of opportunity for engagement with others could be opened up so that inroads of learning and change could be made. She showed how one person in an isolated school could tell her story and set a process in motion that made a difference. Though the journey for the family remains difficult, their progress is remarkable. 'Dara' is still a source of support to them and she is proud of what she achieved in her community by speaking out.