

Aspirations  
Encouragement  
Realism  
Openness

**A recipe for a happy balanced life**

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## **Introduction**

I decided to describe AERO as a sandwich because it is something most of us are familiar with. To me the most important part of a sandwich is the filling, but to others it might be the bread or other outer ingredients which helps form the sandwich.

As a child I used to chuck away the bread and just eat the filling and you might decide to do this and just jump to page 21 and concentrate on how to use AERO both in its original and the evolved AERO formats.

However if you do this you might miss out on why AERO exists [the top piece of bread] or what might affect AERO in the future [the bottom slice].

AERO was devised originally for children but it is equally helpful for adults. You may be living in a unrealistic world and find that one day you wake up and wonder why things have happened to you without you being involved in the process.

This is why I have included issues such as bureaucracy and the power of the media.

The whole point of AERO is that you choose how you use it but also take the consequences for your choice, it's your life not mine!

Using AERO is hopefully fun as well as realistic. Exploring trigger words in the way that you want, rather than everyone else tells you, can give you a sense of freedom and often a buzz. I think that one of the most important words is 'Why' but for many of us who have had children it can also be exhausting because we often wonder ourselves so it's not specifically included in the list just in the process.

If you explore the words with another person or group of people it can become very vibrant.

The other major part of AERO is looking at personalities, yourself and how you perceive others around you. This tool for some is possibly even more powerful than the trigger words.

Just have a go and 'see what happens' [my mother's favourite phrase]

## **The Sandwich**

AERO is like a sandwich between two metaphorical pieces of bread representing society today and in the future.

The first slice you come to is what to some can be the rather tasteless perhaps turning mouldy top slice reflecting the present and past which is trying to be replaced by a healthier slice [the future] but with different views on what ingredients it should contain. The past may be seen as a much healthier slice for some but for others this really wasn't the case. We probably all know of people who came out of school with no qualifications and a 'chip on their shoulder'. A few made a success of their lives despite this, but many plodded along with episodes of bitterness or regrets.

The top slice isn't always dry or mouldy there are times when it is fresh and tasty but also sometimes where there are unexplainable holes which are left and these are the why's of life. It's also about the fact that it can be bread, crackers, oat cakes or other formats depending on who you are, where you come from and how you see the world with the influences or pressures put upon you both by tradition, rule and conformity.

The middle of the sandwich is AERO itself a tool that is so simple and yet also so complicated just the same as any filling can be. But with AERO you get to choose the ingredients depending on two things, the words that you choose and how you define your own and other people's personalities.

How you choose to make your sandwich can either be through the way that you have always made it and your family have made it, or you might like to explore a variety of recipes using different ingredients in different ways. Who says that you can't mix pickled onions with raspberry jam if that works for you and has no ill effects, why not? The words will help you do this.

You might like to have an open sandwich rejecting the top slice of bread, but many of us need that top slice because it just wouldn't be a sandwich without it. How thick the outer slices are depends on how deeply these areas have affected or continue to affect you. Life influences who we are and can help us consider also who we would like to be and you may like to only consider a few issues from the outer slices therefore reducing the thickness or consider all of them and that's fine too. The outer slices might be made of other food substances such as crackers or Staffordshire Oatcakes.

Remember that just because AERO contains a number of words to help you talk and think about your life and the people that impact on you that doesn't mean that you can't explore new words and add them to your own personal recipe book.

The bottom slice to the sandwich is looking to the future and this is my licence to make a few predictions. It's about considering possible scary debatable issues such as what we can as a society afford, both financially and emotionally. It's talking about Robots as carers, companions and protectors. It's about seeing a day when child care and care of the vulnerable is shared between people and Robots and what that might feel like depending on your personality and if it is approached positively rather than avoided or with trepidation.

Before you start making your sandwich look at the cover with the squiggles and boxes which appeals to you most and why? The colours are coincidental and individual for each copy of AERO. What you've started to do is to explore. Now, carry on exploring.....

## **The Top slice**

### **The flour**

In December 2010 just before the end of the school term I read my medical records for the period from 1969 and 1970. I had always believed that I had missed six months of school at the age of fourteen due to being a school phobic but what I found was that on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1970 the term ‘unsocial childhood truancy’ was given for my behaviour.

On 6 February 1970 a letter went from a child Psychologist to my GP described me as ‘a quiet and fairly neatly dressed girl, who was unable to describe her feelings in depth’ It continued ‘My feeling is that it is extremely unlikely that we can help her much here’

My question is Why, was I supposed to know? I was a child, life had become strange and surely it was this guy’s job to help me find out why I felt the way that I did! Instead, he told my GP that I was likely to end up as an inpatient in a new adolescent unit at the local psychiatric hospital!!

I didn’t, I went back to school a few weeks later and muddled through with the help of my wonderful form teacher and stayed to do my ‘A’ levels which I failed miserably having missed essential bits of school.

Nearly forty years later I created AERO.

I didn’t know why I was what I had been told was a school phobic and that whole experience of not knowing had affected how I saw life and what I ended up doing with it. Along the way I have met hundreds of other people equally struggling to understand things about themselves, but given very little to help them. Instead they, like I was, were ‘labelled’ and for some this label got stuck for life. I was much luckier than some. No one except me, my family and who I chose to tell knew that I once had a label and it didn’t affect me getting jobs [as far as I know!!], having my own family and leading an interesting life, but the point is, that it could have ..... and that really is a crucial point.

One of the central ingredients in AERO and very much ‘the flour’ is creating a feeling of Openness, that sense of being able to talk freely and without any labels or if they exist to consider what they truly mean. Nothing is right or wrong, only actions have consequences.

I would love to have been encouraged to talk freely to teachers at school. I loved school, but was also frightened of it, but no one helped me find out why and how I could defeat or control that fear and laugh at it, thus letting it dissolve into a corner of my head and life experience.

My journey led me to return to the place I had once feared, school and to start working with children who were seen as good, bad or most of the time practically invisible. Not because the staff wanted them to be like this, as often they felt themselves but because the structures had created this anomaly where learning set information had begun to inhibit enquiring minds, where bad behaviour drains the time and energy of many teachers and where school takes on many of the tasks that parents should do.

Aspirations aren’t about going to University, they can be, but they can also be so many other things. What they are really about is respecting people’s highs and lows and helping them find the buzzes in life but respecting that their buzz can be someone else’s bore and vice versa.

I guess that you can visit any secondary school in the UK and probably other countries too and you will find the semblance of order and a drive to have high standards. But what are these standards?

Are they based on exam results?

Are they based on low exclusion rates?

Are they based on fitting children into certain boxes with potential outcomes and certain labels and if so what for?

What they also show is how powerful extroverts are in controlling the world that we live in with the most extreme of them feeling that they need to be listened to all of the time and having very little understanding for the quieter more introverted individuals.

Can you imagine being at secondary school and not being able to read any words in this book and being placed in the bottom sets? How would you feel? Well I knew a child who was in this situation and felt like giving up. She couldn’t read even the most basic words and yet she had the most amazing enquiring mind that any Professor would be proud of. I wasn’t going to give up on her and neither were some of the teachers who inherited her from the school that had only seen her as and labelled her as ‘troublesome’.

How would you feel if you were frightened of noise? I knew a child who was. He told me that in one of his subjects he reckoned that he was only learning about 15% of his full potential and he had been feeling like this for years. No one considered that he might need a hearing test and when given one failed miserably, not being able to hear certain pitches and needing a referral to a consultant. He was one of the silent majority, who muddled through doing ok, not wanting to be a bother to anyone just appearing a little sad to anyone who had the time to notice.

Is it possible to hear colours as well as see them? A child I worked with said that he could. I didn't want to challenge him about this. I just wanted to explore with him how he saw the world. He always had "ants in his pants" and could be difficult to manage in a group. He was also a 'ping pong' child being bounced between his parents. They both loved him to bits but had difficulty with each other and didn't he know it and to his detriment play on it! When he was reading words inexplicably floated in different directions across the page.

While this book is being written there are children throughout the UK and the rest of the world feeling confused and frustrated by life. There are also other children who disrupt lessons either just because they always have and don't know how to stop their own behaviour, or because they have learnt that that kind of behaviour gets them noticed. There are other children who are switching off because they can't study with those children in the class or because they are bored out of their brains. They will miss days of school with their attendance dropping to a reasonable level, but who notices when there are others who have expensive packages spent on them to attend school or an alternative that isn't offered to others that is until the cuts hit hard and then what do head teachers and parents do? The bored child might like to try something new which costs very little, but because they aren't a nuisance nothing extra gets spent on them out of the school budget or suggested to their parents if they can afford it. It's the 'bad' children who when making some effort often receive the gold stars whereas the 'good' children who are consistent with their work may receive none. Maybe they come from homes where they are praised, but because they are good or appear to be teachers don't genuinely have time to praise them or even get to know them that well. This is not a criticism of teachers, having worked closely with them for nearly five years I have great admiration for them. No it's just the reality of the current times. It's also the fact that schools generally can't afford to pay for someone like me to help explore these and other issues. We have become so obsessed with pandering to minorities that we forget the silent majority. We also don't seem to value imagination and trial and error as much as when I was a child, or is that a figment of my imagination?

Ask any Head teacher which children they know in their school and I guess that the majority will mainly know either the bad children who get into trouble or the good children who win the awards and in particular those for sport. Apologies to those Head teachers who aren't like that and do actually take time to get to know some of the invisible children. Hopefully through this book you will speak out about how you get to know them and create vibrant, comfortable learning environments.

### **Becoming a School Social worker**

I'd seen social workers in schools in Berlin in 1981 when I was a student, which had been started by the British after the war and during my career I'd met and talked to many teachers and head teachers who had nearly all seen the value of having a social worker in school.

Frankly it was so obvious, if that's where children were supposed to be for a major part of their lives then surely that's where social workers should be! So I wrote to some schools offering to come and work for them on a low wage.

The letters went and I started to panic, wondering what I had done, surely none of them would take me seriously and Ok I dreamed of getting some top up from industry but my attempts with some of the banks and big chain shops had shown interest and sympathy but no possibility. They are still like that at the time of writing.

I'll probably be well retired before they wake up and realise how people like me can actually help cut costs dramatically by helping children before things become a crisis and drop in the pile of referrals in my old team or its sixth reincarnation. Let alone help the invisible children who suffer in silence and will only be detected by being there and having a model of working which helps them to speak or be found. Their voices are often drowned by the noisy demanding children who have learnt this behaviour to compensate for their own lacking needs.

Under their façade some of these loud disruptive children are the most insecure and lacking in confidence human beings I have ever met and yet they gain a tough nut image which they begin to believe is their true selves.

One day I got a phone call from one of the schools that I had picked off a list, a place called Wolgarston.

That letter and that arbitrary pick was one of the best decisions that I had ever made and have never regretted.

I visited the school, talked to one of the Assistant heads and started on 10 May 2006.

### **Help what am I doing here?**

You can only observe for so long especially when you've been used to being incredibly busy as an area social worker. I joined just before the exam season and being May and a secondary school which took children from year nine [age thirteen and fourteen] was plunged in the deep end. I was based in the recently revamped Family and student services known to many of the children as 'Stewdough' with two teaching assistants who were trained first aiders and locals. This meant that they knew a lot of the children who could walk to school, but not from the areas from where the children were bussed into school. It was a hot summer or seemed it and many children came to Stewdough to get some water. I spent a lot of time filling up bottles and handing out plasters. I chatted to children along the way and took a few upset children for a deeper chat in a little room that had no windows and where I would often feel boiling hot.

I didn't really get to know many of the teaching staff in those days and only met Phil, the Head on my initial visit to school. He had started in the September before me and in some ways seemed a bit scary. I suppose the reality of me returning to school to stay rather than just pop in as I did as an area social worker seemed a bit daunting and perhaps masochistic.

I worked initially two days a week from nine until one and would leave feeling slightly relieved but as time went on slightly disappointed too.

I regularly wondered what I was doing there but never wanted to return to the mad world of social work that I had left.

### **Finding the words**

The summer holiday came and went and I hoped that when I returned in the September that I would still get paid. By now I had extended my time to three mornings a week and eventually went to eighteen hours a week.

As the new school year started I thought I should have something more concrete to work with and remembered a word chart that I had devised to use with student social workers. I started using the chart with children who were confused or angry about life. I used the words as triggers to help them talk and amazingly for many they helped. But not only that, but through using them children started finding out for themselves why they felt the way that they did.

However I've always been convinced that we underestimate people's individual personalities and the impact they have on the way we see and live in the world and so began to explore why this might be. It all went back to me and my 'annoying' school phobia. I tried to find out why I was so confident doing certain things and such a wreck doing others. I began to wonder whether all the loud mouthed children who came barging and demanding out of lessons really were bigoted individuals that were to be avoided like the plague or were they like some of the loud mouths that I had come across when I worked with people I didn't know in the area office. Were they as frustrated and if they were, why were they and what could I do to help them sort out their frustrations or even live with them? Could I really approach them with the hard realities of the world, when they moaned about hating school? Could I really tell them that 'tough' it's the law of the land and so they just have to find a way of dealing with it.

As a social worker I'd often wanted to tell people to 'get a life' but kept my 'gob' shut. Some children hadn't a clue what they wanted out of life and others had very unrealistic plans and frankly I'd have more chance of being Prime Minister than they would doing some of the things that they thought that they could. I didn't want to knock their dreams because I had myself given up trying to do what I really wanted to because no one had helped me become more confident to do it.

One day I woke up with the four words in my head which became AERO. It seemed to make so much sense, to have aspirations, to be encouraged, to live in a real rather than airy fairy world and most of all and perhaps sometimes the hardest to do to be as open as you can about all of it. At the time I didn't

realise that what started as a few words would turn into a philosophy that would eventually become far too big for just me to handle and in some ways a 'massive' burden.

### **Going in the staff room**

When I started working full days to start with I went out at lunch time like the two other members of staff but as a new September dawned [2008] I ventured on a regular basis not only into the staff room but also into the school canteen.

I decided to just sit and eat with anyone I found there and there were the regulars. On Wednesdays one of the teachers would bring in the pub quiz from a few days before and I would sit in wonderment at their knowledge feeling rather inadequate. I've never been good at things like that I'm much more of a story teller. Remembering facts and figures and names has always been a problem to me. But it was a great way to become part of the school team.

### **Being supervised by the Head**

Phil used to say that there were generally two types of schools, the ones that concentrated on good results and got rid of [excluded] the children who disrupted these aims and the schools that concentrated on the welfare needs of children and faltered when it came to the good results. I'm not sure whether a school can go into special measures if its results are great but it excludes masses of children, but frankly it should, because what is it saying about the sanctity of humanness.

My whole working career has been tainted by other people's avoidance and the idea that someone else will do it, whatever the something else is.

Well Phil and I wanted Wolgarston to be a place where both good education/ learning and good welfare had equal status.

### **Looking through the year nine files**

I began to see that there were children whose attendance was around the 85% mark who, also seemed to be dropping in their projected results. I started looking at a few of these children's files and saw that their results were much higher a few years before, or that they had perfect attendance.

I can't remember whose idea it was whether it was mine or Phil's, but it was decided that just before the summer hols that I would start looking at the files of children who were arriving in September from middle school. I would not only record any issues but also if there were no obvious issues. I thought that this could give us a measure in relation to the children who were likely to have an upset of some form whether by continuing disruptive behaviour, patterns of poor attendance or any family issues such as family bereavements. I was also interested in those that had no obvious issues who came for support early in the year at stew dough.

My view was that this information would only be there as a back- up and that for most children the information might quickly be out of date.

As I went through the files I found a noticeable difference in recording between the two feeder schools. One seemed to write every incident down whereas the other only wrote on a need to know basis and shared information with select members of school [me not being one] which meant that as far as I was concerned the children had no obvious issues.

I was amazed that from the school that was open about what it recorded about forty percent of the children appeared to either have minor or major disruptions whereas from the other school there were relatively few.

Several children emerged with difficulties fairly early on in the year who I had recorded as having no obvious issues in their files.

I began to wonder if all of the children were perfectly behaved and what the school that had the many disrupters had done with them to try to change their behaviour because there was very little recording about action taken.

### **Confidentiality versus Openness starting the debate**

As a social worker and community worker I was always a believer in confidentiality but not in a secretive sense, but in terms of not showing your dirty washing in public.

But I had told my boss after my daughter died that I wanted everyone to know so that it would make it easier for both me and them. This decision was ignored and when I returned to work the very first morning three significant people didn't know that she had died and asked me how my baby was and that they didn't expect me back at work so soon. By the end of that morning I was just about holding it together but my line manager was livid and went storming into a meeting of the senior managers and screamed at them.

“Rachel said that she wanted everyone to know” and their response was that they thought it was best for me.

This idea of being best for me or them perpetuates through people work and especially in work with children. Who decides that its best and why? It can lead to all sorts of power battle grounds, for example the closed nature of the family courts deciding the fate of children.

What bothers me about confidentiality is that the very people who should decide what people should or shouldn't know and who should or shouldn't know are children and their parents. I'm not saying that everyone in school needs to know everything about a child but that it would be helpful to know who has been involved with a child and how they generally coped or didn't in their previous schools.

I found it rather disturbing to talk with children who were upset about life for whatever reason to find that they had visited CAMHS [Child Adolescent mental health service] in some cases regularly for years and yet they still didn't know why they felt the way that they did. It reminded me of my own situation with regard to my school phobia and the answers that I sought. The majority of their files had no record of any appointments or ways of working. It's not about the ins and outs of working with a child it's just the fact that someone has worked with them.

### **Won't let me cook the tea Dad is always tired, Mum is never there!**

These are the comments of a frustrated young person. His parents were worn out by the behaviour of a sibling and so didn't have the energy to spend time with the younger child. He therefore learnt to behave like his brother thus getting his parents attention.

It's hard following another child into school. I never had to do that at secondary school as my brothers went to a different school to me. They went to the single sex school whereas I went to the mixed comprehensive.

One thing that I've found interesting is seeing siblings who are very similar both in terms of their personalities and their intellect.

For those that are very different it can be a hard start to secondary school especially if their sibling had some form of difficulty in school either in terms of poor behaviour or emotional issues. The sibling is often either expected to behave the same, or feel that they need to.

### **The Fat and the Yeast**

You may choose lard, butter, marge, a completely different kind of fat or a combination of all of them to create your loaf, but without it your bread, crackers or Staffordshire Oatcakes could be tasteless or not bond together. You may also choose another ingredient to replace the yeast such as soda and have bread that doesn't rise. Most bread has yeast the same as most people follow a similar life pattern, going to school and then finding some kind of work or extended education.

To me the fat is bureaucracy and the yeast is the media, together they have the power to create a wholesome loaf or a dry tasteless one.

No bread, crackers or Staffordshire Oatcakes can exist on flour alone. Modern life is infected by both government and the media. If you choose Staffordshire Oatcakes then these are wrapped around you rather than being distinctly separated from you. With bread or crackers you are more separated unless you decide to become a toastie and might get hot under the collar about all of it.

I have found that many children understand life through metaphors somehow it makes the mundane or scary more exciting or manageable.

Living in a world of recessions means that our sandwiches may contain either less fat or a different type of fat.

Most of our fat is still controlled by London and so for the many of us who can't get there through extortionate travel costs or time we are dependent on this fat being the right kind of fat.

### **The Thomas Hardy effect**

In the film of 'Far From the Madding Crowd' based on the book by Thomas Hardy there is a scene where sheep follow each other off a cliff into the sea. In the film it is a loss of livelihood but in life do we as a nation do this to our children letting them follow each other not knowing why and do some fall off that cliff into the sea of life?

My chats with disruptive children often indicated that they had learnt to behave like this not because they really wanted to, but because everyone else did and so they wanted to be part of the crowd. It's the brave child who stands alone and is strong enough to avoid these influences.

I was rather disturbed to find that Hardy who wanted to be buried in Dorset has half his body there and half at Westminster Abbey. Why do we not listen to what people request?

The Thomas Hardy effect of being a 'sheep' is only half of the story, in 'Far from the madding crowd' each of the main characters were desperately, fighting for their individual identities within a harsh world.

We are human beings, although at times we may be forced to behave as sheep. It would be nice if there were more people to stop children falling off cliffs and instead embrace the sea via beaches.

### **Ping pong children**

Imagine having to stay at one parent's house one night of the week and the others the next night and so on and so on.

Imagine having different rules about when you should be in and bedtimes. It's not surprising that after doing this for half of your life that you begin to be confused especially when you visit a mate's house and find that they don't live like this. On top of this you hear your parents still arguing after all of this time.

So school becomes some kind of salvation, or does it? Do you become the invisible child suffering in silence or the loud over the top child who is always in trouble and whose school file is twice the size of most because it is jammed packed with incident slips? These incidents slips don't really say how things were resolved, they just comment that they were, or say nothing valid at all.

Has anyone actually in all of those years sat you down rather than told you off and asked why you feel the way that you do, or behave the way that you do?

Imagine being someone in your class who actually likes the subject that you're disrupting, but has this 'nuisance' in there who is preventing you from learning, how annoying that would be and how vindictive you might become.

There's lots of imagination there but that's the reality in schools today. We have an unknown number of what I call Ping pong children who are bounced both physically and emotionally between their parents.

On the face of it both parents might seem and are caring people, but when it comes to each other they have got fixed in a negative battle ground with their increasingly ageing child or children getting the fallout.

How can the AERO worker help? Well, they can take the child on an exploratory journey to find out what they see as 'normal'. Most parents love and want the best for their children and their child's journey will affect them and help them to find a new way to live their life.

Quite a number of parents have been Ping pong children themselves and to them the arguments and confrontation is 'normal' but have they done what they wanted career wise or other ways in life? The truth is that we don't know whether it was being a Ping pong child that prevented this, or just parts of their personality and the circumstances of life.

If the courts get involved in the ping pong child's life it can add even more of a burden. How can you tell a CAF/CASS social worker that you really want to live with your Dad? How do you deal with your Mum saying that she misses you so much and wished that you wanted to spend more time with her when you want to spend more time with your mates and just want your parents to 'get a life' These are all scenarios that children have explored with me and exploration really is the key word. With checking your Aspirations helping you to realise that acceptance is all that you can really do at home and understanding the point of changing your behaviour at school actually helps you do it.

I have worked with thousands of varieties of families and with differing family incomes and I really think that although biologically it would be nice for children in an ideal world to have their makers in their lives, in the real world what matters most is the will to realise that when you have a child they should be the leading part of your life until they are adults.

Do most parents actually know about their children's personalities and the complexities that can be tied up with children who are fairly introvert in one situation but the opposite in another?

When I worked with AERO with children at school we usually used the Introvert/ extrovert chart and used it both on the child themselves but also their parents. It can be a remarkable tool to see why there may be conflict between different family members.

I think that personality is so underestimated when considering why families are functional or dysfunctional. Personality changes over time. I am both an introvert and extrovert but I have managed to suppress a lot of my introversion over time because it's the part that I don't like so much. I explain to children that I only enter the 8 to 10 zone if I see an injustice. [see page 26]

### **Do extroverts rule and/ or screw up the world?**

As someone who is a mix of an introvert and an extrovert I feel that I am in an OK position to consider this whole debate.

When I was seeking answers one of the ways of doing this was to approach the media instead of fear the media.

The world of social work, like many other caring professions, had begun to take on the negative traits of its own introversion by being too self-critical. When a child died instead of making the public realise that protecting a child more than once a week let alone 24/7 was an impossible job without the person power or should I say mainly woman power at massive cost to society.

No, Social work had to own up as the main guilty folk rather than become one of the many blamers. Like the litter at school with the children who say, "Well I didn't drop it!" when you question them. Well somebody did you say but also say that we wouldn't be in such a mess if we all helped out and didn't drop it in the first place.

So why have a go at extroverts? Well aren't they the noisiest in society? Aren't they the people who are fun at a party but then can become tedious after a while?

Having talked to children and considering where they are on the introvert/ extrovert chart the higher number they are the more that they tend to need people all of the time and have to be the centre of everything that is going on.

In the original AERO starting on page 18 I record the details of a young person who had two parents that he scored as 8 on the extrovert chart and two step parents that he scored as 4. He had scored himself as mainly a 5 and so found himself trapped between his attention seeking parents who put very selfish demands on him. He was the one who had to live in each household every other day but eventually managed to sort out a compromise between them

Put this into the context of society as a whole if parts of the country contain the most extroverts then does this mean that like in a school environment that others are more introverted and that if you come from one of those areas that you become labelled. Children who have either extrovert parents or introverted parents who have the opposite traits might find life a little difficult.

Extroverts tend to be much more demanding and get bored more easily and so are they the best people to make decisions about society as a whole? They may be good at starting things and pushing things along but would they forget the detail and leave the baby at the shop?

Ideally I would like to see introverts and extroverts matched professionally together because I think that they can learn from each other and for those with the extreme of the traits can become less so.

Going back to the idea of Extroverts ruling and screwing up the world my answer would be that in some ways that they do and the problem is that those ways may be crucial to our survival. Consider the bankers who screwed up and put so many countries into debt and yet take such great bonuses, are these people extroverts? I can't believe that an introvert that makes even a minor blunder would later expect a bonus when they sort things out and make things better! Surely it's just part of the job! So why expect to get more than your wage? To me that is so arrogant and insensitive which can match the negative parts of extroversion.

### **The Yeast or Soda- The media**

The thing that I get frustrated about is that they, being TV, Radio, Newspapers, the Internet and whatever else gets invented along the way could be such amazing tools for helping people but instead what they do really is still mostly to titillate and entertain and often in a morbid, bitchy, crowd fight style.

The excuse made by the media is that, that is what people want to read or see or hear but who has decided that this is the case?

If you want to have more influence then like me you could join VLV [the Voice of the Listener and Viewer] <http://www.vlv.org.uk/vlv-events/vlv-exhibit.html>

### **Financial versus emotional poverty**

Frank Field MP led a review of child poverty at the same time as the Government were bringing in the pupil premium, an amount of money linked to free school meals. This inevitably meant that a school like Wolgarston that doesn't have many children on free school meals had to muddle through with a reduced budget.

What the Government didn't seem to get, is that 'emotional poverty' is as bad an issue in the UK as 'financial poverty'. The child that has every kind of gadget who lives in a big house but has parents that are always working suffers just as much or more than the child whose parents have very little.

In my time at Wolgarston many of the Ping pong children's parents were financially well off and they, like some of the together parents, didn't seem to know how to enjoy their children. I know that

if you have a demanding child you can get worn down both physically and emotionally.

### **Evaluation of AERO**

In 2008 Professor Mark Doel who was then Professor of social work at Sheffield Hallam University wrote of AERO

“Rachel Bramble writes from the heart and from her own experience, personal and professional. Following a fine tradition of practical, positive social work, Rachel presents a model of practice that she has developed and refined through use and experimentation.

This guide is presented in an accessible, direct style, which is engaging and winning. Rachel writes with the same passion that gave rise to the AERO model itself. This model is straightforward and practical, and powerful in terms of its impact on people's lives; the author demonstrates the power of imagination when harnessed to reality checks. Although written for school-based social workers, the AERO model would work in a wide variety of settings and with adults as much as children

In a context where social workers now spend less of their time in direct work with people, Rachel's approach is a refreshing call to all social workers to reclaim face-to-face work with people; after all, whoever wanted to go into social work to sit at a computer screen, to become a 'purchaser' or a care manager? I think readers will feel inspired as 'Guiders', which is the term Rachel uses to describe her approach to social work. Armed with a wealth of tried and tested ideas, this book puts us back in touch with why we want to be social workers.

Even more importantly, Rachel reminds us that people have strengths and aspirations and that, however difficult life is just now, these qualities are only waiting for someone to kindle them. Reading this guide, we are left in no doubt what a privilege it is to be a Guider.”

In 2009 he evaluated AERO in the context of Wolgarston High School. This evaluation was funded by my family and friends costing £5000. I had approached the Head of the local children's services at the time asking for some funds because he had been very interested in AERO and had told me that I should try to get it into every school in Staffordshire. But like many people who say you should do something he didn't say how.

AERO tries to show people how they can look at those four key factors in everyone's life.

It shows you how to Aspire, How to encourage, how to live in a real world and also hopefully ever increasingly how to be open but in a sensitive way.

Below is sample of Mark's evaluation.

### **Overview of findings**

The AERO model (detailed in Bramble, 2008b) is successful in engaging a broad range of young people experiencing a wide variety of problems, whether these are focused at school, at home or a mix of both. Specifically, the method was found to help in these ways:

- increased young people's self-knowledge
- developed greater awareness of others' perspectives
- encouraged a release of feelings that had been pent up
- made problems manageable by breaking them down into smaller parts
- gave students a choice in an informal setting
- helped young people to make plans and to carry them through successfully
- had a lasting effect that went beyond a 'feel-good' at the time.

Typical comments from students at the school about the impact of the AERO method of working:

*You find out things about yourself that you didn't know before ... you're learning about yourself.*

*It [AERO] works because it puts other people's views across to you so you can understand what you're doing and why it's affecting others.*

*It makes you sort out your feelings, makes you recognise your feelings.*

*It broke things down and made them manageable.*

*[What I liked best was] that it was me making choices.*

*I made sense of it straight way. It was really easy to refer to.*

The AERO model helped students to build their self-confidence, to make and keep friendships, to grow up, to behave better, to control anger, to change thinking, feeling and doing, and many other personal and social improvements. All of the students were able to understand the method, especially after they had actually tried it. Only one of the twelve was critical, but she had been 'volunteered' to demonstrate it, so she did have an actual problem to work on.

The professionals and the parent interviewed for the research were positive about the impact of AERO. A student social worker learned how to use the model very quickly and with success, and there was general agreement that it could be used with adults as well as young people, and possible with younger children, too.

Suggested changes to the model were minor and aimed at improving some of the language. It is highly adaptable, so these changes can be made on the spot by practitioners who use it. The research revealed that the core elements of the model (The Words and The Scale) were adapted according to the individual situation and that this flexibility was part of its success.

Though a relatively small sample, it is a representative one. It is evident that those who experience this method of working like it and find it effective over time. Coupled with a supportive school environment, it has helped sustain the policies that have been put in place by the head teacher and the staff at the school.

**In conclusion**, this research has found that the philosophy of social inclusion introduced by a new head teacher can be sustained by a systematic approach to providing social and personal support to students, and by the use of an effective and efficient social work practice method - with dramatic results.

### **How to do it**

Throughout my career I have heard people tell others that they should do this and that but what I mostly never hear is how to do it.

Well I want to show you how to explore with a child and I want you to tell me other ways of exploring that you have tried.

This is the only way that we can help all children because children are like making cakes. You only have to change the ingredients slightly or have the oven at a different temperature and the outcome will be different.

What follows is AERO in two parts.

AERO original in its whole unchanged format and AERO as it has evolved with new added words and thoughts.

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### **The Original AERO**

‘Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness’ was published by Bramble Jordan publishing in 2008. It was the only way that we could get AERO out quickly in a published form not only to legitimise AERO but also to protect it from people who might tinker with it and use it for their own status or to control them.

There has never been any intention to make money from AERO. It is there to be tool to help anyone who is either, angry, bored, frustrated or just purely interested in why things may be the way they are or why they react the way that they do to different situations. In a climate which is constantly changing parts of it and terminology might become dated and I hope the reader will accept this as all of our lives change.

### **Talents not Targets**

In the early 1990s competencies were brought into social work training, closely followed by targets in all public sector areas.

I believe that this has led to a perplexed, confused workforce, no longer encouraged to use its imagination.

You may think that it never did in the first place, but remember the history of our country and its many inventions.

For some reason private was seen as being better than public sector and more cost effective, but this hasn't been proven to be the case.

People are different from goods. We cannot be moulded and stay in a particular shape. As well as coming in all shapes and sizes there are a multitude of things that make our individual personas.

As a child I read competently and widely, but then at secondary school I sat next to a fast reader, who was one of my friends. I had to share books with her, but as a slow reader I couldn't keep up, and the words became one sticky mess in my head.

Had the teacher given us the task beforehand I could have curled up and read the books at home, but no, they were just thrust at us in the lesson, and my memory refused to jump to at the appropriate time. I know what I'm best at, but who else ever looked for my talents?

I was the child in the top sets, but as a slow reader struggled, and no one took me aside to work out why. I was too shy to tell anyone and so one day just stopped going to school. I got the label 'school phobic'.

I still don't know what I was actually frightened of and wonder whether anyone at the time knew either.

They were looking for what had gone wrong in my life rather than looking for my talents.

We have had numerous governments that are fixated on correcting blemishes rather than looking at the whole picture.

I believe that it is time not only to have TV programmes called 'Britain's Got Talent' which only encourage one type of talent (entertainment), but also schools that encourage a variety of talents.

AERO [Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness] started as a method that could be used with children in a secondary school in the United Kingdom. During its development it has become apparent that it could be used with all sorts of people in different settings.

The central philosophy is based on a collection of words that could help individuals explore who they are, what they want out of life, and through this process lead towards a happier, more fulfilling future. Social work has for too long been rooted in problems that do not necessarily lead to happy solutions. The aim of AERO is to have a completely different approach. By giving people a point to living and the encouragement to go for whatever they 'Aspire' to they can find out what the blockages are in their lives to achieving their aims.

'Encouragement' is very closely linked with the 'Realism' but it's not about trying to put people off doing what they feel that they want in life, it's more about helping them explore the whys and why nots of doing it, and even finding different routes.

AERO is something that could become a way of life for both the 'User' and the 'Guider', who will also learn from the experience.

Wolgarston High School, Staffordshire

September 2007

"Have you got a minute to see Jane?" Barbara asked, as I sat writing up the pile of scribbled notes that had been gathering that day.

"Of course I have," I replied, knowing that the write-ups could wait and that the child mattered more.

Jane was trying hard not to cry, as we walked from Student Services, through an open space sometimes used for teaching special needs, disruptive or talented students. The little room that we used for talking to students in private was basic and sometimes too hot for me.

I hadn't said anything to Jane before other than a casual "Hello" on her frequent visits to Student Services when she had been seeking support. She was to become one of over a hundred students that I had helped during the seventeen months that I had been at Wolgarston High school.

We sat and chatted. It was hard going at first, as her sobbing made it difficult for me to hear what she had to say.

"I just don't know who I am!" she sobbed.

"Don't worry," I said, "we'll find out together." This statement sounded rather arrogant and simplistic, but, remarkably, it was also true.

We sat and used the 'Who' chart that I had devised about ten years before to help Social Work students look at the world that they would work in, through what I then called 'Communication Awareness.'

As we considered words on the chart, and what they meant to her, she began to appear calmer and interested.

I looked at my watch to make sure that we didn't intrude into her next lesson. It was important for her to be back at class in time for it, to be part of the school and not to cut herself off. She wanted to come back. She needed to know more, so we fixed another time.

My work as an area social worker had seen too much of children being separated from their real world, the world that included school and school friends.

I didn't want her to be like me. I didn't want her to follow in my footsteps, watching her daughter get outstanding GCSE results and feeling a tinge of jealousy, wondering how she herself could have done, if she had not missed so much school. I didn't want people to tell her nearly forty years later how intelligent she was, whilst at the same time she felt like an idiot because she couldn't write things the way that the powerful world wanted.

I didn't want her demons, whatever they were, to take over her life, leaving her miserable, dreary and isolated, with her aspirations and dreams seeming beyond reach. That is why I helped her and students like her, and will continue to help those still to come.

I was her Guider and it was a privilege to have that role.

### **The Role of the Guider**

In this book the Guider is a qualified social worker, but I believe that all sorts of people could take on this role. Essentially the Guider needs not only to be able to listen to what the student has to say, but also to have the ability to use his or her imagination to help the students when they become blocked and to help them control the flow of their own awareness.

I would suggest that the Guider should make some notes with dates, because often referring back can help students realise that they have moved on in life quite significantly, and can remind them of their states of mind at certain times.

Students who have used AERO have become extremely self-aware and, as such, may have been unblocking years of suppressed feelings, so the Guider should have a sensitivity to this and be ready for

the student to come back when they are ready, but also be sensitive to the fact that they might display outward distress or anger. Most students will want to continue with the chart for a couple or more lessons, but a few will leave it for a while and come back months later saying that they want to do more.

AERO can apply as much to the student who seems to be coping with life, but inside is truly troubled, as to the one who shows obvious displays of not coping or disruptiveness.

I have come across students in school who a teacher would not consider needing to come to a Guider because in terms of the education system they are doing well. They are the non-disruptive, average children who when they start using the guide quickly appear to have an astute awareness which places them at a much higher intellectual level.

Much has been talked in recent days about why 'looked after' children don't achieve as well as children living at home, but relatively little is talked about those children with high natural intellectual skills who survive in very emotionally charged environments. My practical use of AERO has encouraged some of these students to come forward and explore how to be motivated in school when their home environment doesn't encourage it.

Using the guide has shown them that they can be more creative and lead a balanced life and head towards being the parents that they would like to have had themselves, breaking the cycle that has often been talked about in social work.

### **How to use the guide**

The Guide is split into four sections, which are:

Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness.

One of the problems with our education system is that we don't actively encourage people to aspire. We tend to look at the obvious rather than search for the hidden talents and skills. This means that if people appear to be coping and reaching the expected standards, we just leave them to it. That is fine, as long as they really are coping, but if they are not, then there is often nowhere for them to go for help.

It is important that children learn at a young age the balance between asking for help and managing themselves, so that they do not just 'muddle through' or become dependent.

Whether what they aspire to is realistic or not can depend on a number of factors, but so many students, at too young an age, have their hopes and dreams dashed. It is as if it is wrong to believe in Father Christmas or handsome Princes or Princesses. But without these dreams, how do we ever get the new inventions and ideas? They may appear to be wacky to some, but to others, they give ideas of endless possibilities to create new things.

AERO can help students look at dreams in the context of the real world in a balanced way. This means that you don't exclude the dreams, because some people may be able to reach their dreams or even follow a parallel dream.

AERO is as much about infecting adults as it is about the direct work with students. Its reminding teachers of helping students aspire in the real world.

It's also about being the 'go-between' with parents, other adults and children, helping them with the way that their child sees the world or is seen by the world. Often students and parents get different perspectives on things as students and teachers do. It's helping to look at consequences.

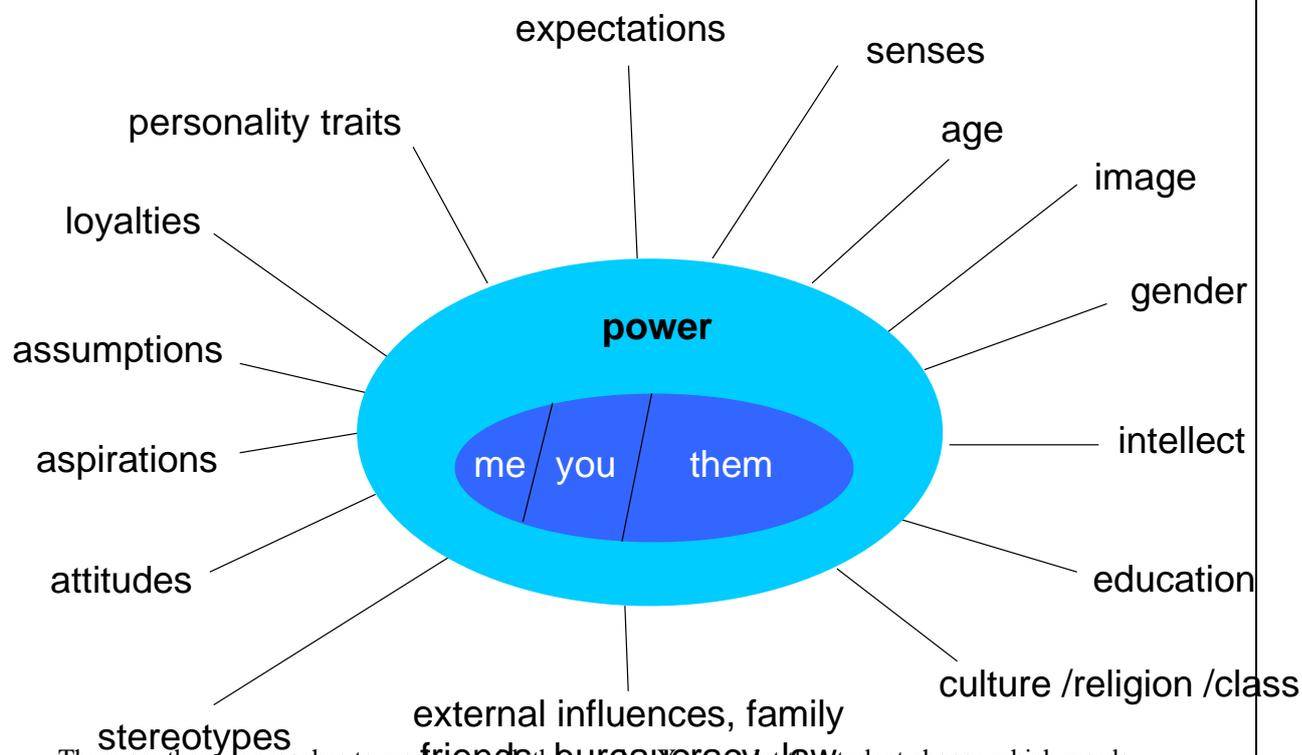
AERO is not about hypocrisy, it's about 'Openness' and that openness includes sharing things, when appropriate, that are part of the Guider, but putting them in context.

For example many students at Wolgarston know that I was a school-phobic, and that I would have liked to have become an actress.

The sections are interchangeable and can be dipped in and out of.

To help a student progress from confusion, trauma or anger, however, it is advisable to spend some time in each section.

## The Original AERO words



There are three approaches to working with the words. One is to let the student choose which words they want to talk about, or you, yourself, can choose which word you want them to talk about, or they may ask you to choose a word to start with. When considering which approach to use you should consider power and control issues. Is there a reason why you have to take control? If not, don't. Let the student have some power.

I prefer the first approach most of the time, but sometimes it is necessary to direct students to a specific word, especially if they are in a situation where their attendance at school is badly affected which, in time, may find them excluded from school or their non-attendance resulting in their parents being prosecuted.

My advice is that in most cases you get them to choose the word and if they ask you to choose, then pick 'Aspiration' as your first word.

The exercises included are things I have tried and have worked to some little or great extent. Feel free to let your imagination lead you into new ideas and ways of helping students begin to talk and solve their own issues. By doing this, there is much more chance of success.

### Aspirations

You could look the word up in a dictionary or on the computer but it's much better for you to do that with a student.

Right from the start when working with students it is important for them to realise that you are talking with them about them, who they are and where they would like to be in the future.

Without Aspirations what do we have to live for? That's why so many films and stories become important to us because we can dream and imagine that one day we might be there doing that thing, or being with that person or people.

Students who come to me have often lost the capacity to dream. They perceive their lives as one mess, one muddle of confusion and negativity.

There is an increasing number who self-harm because the pain of slicing their arm or thigh is less than coping with the world that they live in. I know this because they tell me. I ask them to show me the scars and we talk about what they mean to them, where they were at the time and why they did it. Sometimes they tell their parents too, but often they hold those secrets within themselves. Helping them to aspire gives them some purpose in life rather than them thinking that they are worthless with no talents.

Sometimes it's important where the dreams are ridiculous to make them even more ridiculous, in fact so ridiculous that the student can laugh with you about them. This can be a way of freeing them up from their negative lives and thought patterns.

You may have a temptation straight away to put their dreams in the context of the real world, but try to hold back for a bit and let them have the dream, even encourage them to have the dream. If they then say 'but this is stupid' ask them what dreams could they have that aren't stupid

So how do you get them to aspire?

Note: Remember with these and any other activities, unless there are child protection concerns, what you record and keep should be agreed with the student, but encourage them to keep things. They may want to look back in the future. They should know that ultimately they own the information.

Try the activity below

Imagine you could be anywhere in the world having the best kind of party you ever could

Who would be there with you?

What kind of place would you be staying in?

What kind of food and drink would you have?

What kind of party would it be?

What music would you have?

You can have your own parallel plan to help them free their mind as much as possible. It's ok for it to be in Hollywood with their favourite star. Why not?

You are in charge of school and given the freedom to choose the curriculum

What would you choose and why?

You can go to town on this, but then you can ask:

What problems may you have and why?

Give them a budget and remind them that they have to pay staff etc

By doing this exercise students are learning to look through other people's eyes.

Where do you want to be and what do you want to be doing when you are

A] 17

B] 25

C] 35

D] 45

It is amazing what some students come up with. Some follow the same patterns and dreams that their parents have and others want to live their lives very differently. There are yet others who can't even think past today. If they are one of the latter, talk about what you, yourself remember wanting to do. If you are younger than any of these ages share your experiences to date and your dreams for the future. You are giving them a place to be 'who' they want to be for a while.

After they have answered these questions ask them why they have these views and where they think they come from.

### **Draw your future world and the people that will be in it**

If you want to do this activity it is best to leave students in a room, on their own, and come back, say, fifteen minutes later. You can be 'directive' and get them to draw certain themes such as the places, people and things in their life or just let them draw anything in a 'non-directive' way.

You can also get them to use a variety of colours

When you return ask them whether they need more time and if they are willing to share with you what they have drawn. It is important for them to feel that they have control of their pictures.

They may want to use a combination of words and pictures.

### **Encouragement**

To encourage students you need to look at who they are and their qualities and talents. I therefore include in this section;

Personality traits, image, attitudes, assumptions, education and intellect.

### **Personality Traits**

This is an area that is rarely openly used in social work, but to me is an increasingly important one for society as a whole. It often seems to me that extroverts are running the world and that the introverts with good level-headed ideas often never get heard.

This is reflected in classrooms with teacher's time being overbalanced towards the dominant extrovert students, not necessarily through the teacher's choice, but through class management. One student who came to me felt that she was invisible and whilst observing her class I could see why she felt this way, because she was working in a group that appeared to be over-weighted with attention seeking extroverts.

In society whilst the use of TV and other forms of communication have grown, instant fixes have become the norm and time to listen has diminished.

Students come to me for all sorts of reasons. They may find it difficult at school and home and may also be lacking in confidence.

They may be angry about life generally, but don't know why, or have suppressed their anger for too long.

They may not have any purpose in life, or be incredibly bored and frustrated.

What they all have in common is the desire to know who they are.

I get them to look at where they fit on a scale, from very introverted to very extroverted, and whether they are like this in all situations, or their behaviour varies in different settings.

Whereas existing personality traits tests tend to have prescriptive, clearly defined choices, I get students to reflect on an arbitrary scale, with the idea that the more introverted you are, the more sensitive you are likely to be to others. In essence, I believe that most people fit different places in different settings, but what is interesting in discussions is why. It is not for me to define anyone else. Below is my view of an introvert/extrovert scale which students seem to understand.

I use a scale of 1-10 with 1 being extremely introverted, even perhaps a hermit, to 10 being way over the top extrovert. I explain to them that as a nation I believe that the UK scores about a 4, as we are generally not extrovert enough as a nation to sing our own praises, and historically have lost some of our best inventions because we weren't noisy and outgoing enough about how good they were.

The USA is much better at singing its own praises as a nation and speaking out, so this is why I scored them as 6.

The UK obsession with TV celebrities means that a lot of young people wish to be in the 7 plus range, which they may call 'the popular kids'. The higher you go up the scale, however, the more likely you are to want to be centre of attention. The lower down the scale, the more you might dream that you are at the top, and get frustrated or bored by lack of attention.

I get students to plot where they think that they are in a number of contexts and situations e.g. in classes, with their friends, at home. We then look at whether there is anything that they could do to change things if they want to or whether they just have to accept things as they are and learn to live with their situation.

Students may come back at a later date and change where they think they are.

We also plot significant people in their lives e.g. parents, friends, siblings, boyfriend/ girlfriends and even teachers.

Through this diagram they begin to see their distress, annoyance or frustrations and decide whether they want to make changes or accept their situation and who they are.

### Introvert/ Extrovert chart

		Description	Location or Situation	Action to take or Acceptance
Self Abs orbe d	1	Hermit. Happy with own company		
	2	Self-harm. Possibly suicidal tendencies		
Sens itive to othe rs	3	Shy introverted		
	4	Slightly introverted. Typical view of UK		
	5	Balanced. Could be indecisive.		
	6	Outgoing. Typical view of USA		
	7	Bubbly outgoing		
Self- Cent red	8	Loud noisy. Insensitive to others		
	9	Centre of attention. Can be on own. Might swing to 2		
	10	Centre of attention. Can never be on own. Easily swing to 2.		

### Real students plot themselves on the chart

**Student A** places herself as 3 in lessons because although she can answer questions, she doesn't generally put herself forward. She would like to be nearer to 5 because she feels that the teachers would notice her and she would be more confident when she needed help. She is currently studying at B/C level, but knows that she could do better.

With her school friends she puts herself as 6 as she can be more outgoing, but at home she places herself at 2 because she has no home friends and has self-harmed when she felt very low. She doesn't feel that she can talk to her parents about how she feels.

**Student B** is often in trouble in lessons. He places himself as 8 in the lessons, but 6 with friends. He feels that to keep up with his group of friends at school that he has to mess about in lessons, but realises that by doing this he is threatening his future career. He came to me for protection one day because he had been challenged to a fight by another student, but didn't want to fight him and end up being excluded from school. Rumours of the fight were getting around the school and he was finding it hard to ignore the challenge, but also knew the consequences. At home he placed himself at 3. We did a chart for each of his parents and step-parents. Both of his parents he placed at 8 and his step-parents at 4. Together we created and he named a fictitious ideal girlfriend. He wanted her to be a 5. He realised that he had to change his behaviour if he wanted to attract a 5 person because his current behaviour prevented him from joining groups which contained 5's and limited him to a very small 7/8 group, who were generally admired, but also disliked by large numbers of students. Working through AERO has helped him realise that he truly is a combination of a 6 and 3.

His behaviour has become more acceptable and he now has a close friend whom he scored as a 3 who, he says, keeps him calm.

**Student C** places himself at 5 in all contexts and found that because of it, he really was trapped between the introverts and the extroverts.

He has come back on a number of occasions and is working very slowly through AERO, finding it a painful, but, for him, a necessary process.

He, like student B, had two parents placed at 8 and two step-parents placed at 4, and he realised how powerful and controlling the parents were over their partners and over him. For example he was forced to live alternate days in each house which meant that, on occasions, he wouldn't have PE kit etc. at school and thus could get reprimanded by teachers. At the end of the first session looking at the chart he decided that the person he would most like to live with, if he had to choose between the four parents, was one of his step-parents whom he had scored at 4. He later came back and said that he had changed his mind and that he would like to live with his dad, but that he didn't want him controlling him so much.

## **Image**

We look at how students see themselves and how they think, other people see them.

For students who are lacking in confidence, I sometimes involve other people who know them in the discussion. This is to show them the qualities and skills they do have.

I had a student who wanted to be a doctor, but was so lacking in confidence that she couldn't get herself into an increasing number of classes. She was cross with herself for being so introverted.

Through looking at her self-image I could begin to help her build her confidence.

She is now an active member of the school's learning council and is involved in the school's anti-bullying policies.

I have other students who get upset or angry about all sorts of things and sometimes get excluded from, or withdraw themselves from lessons.

They want to know why and what they can do about it.

There are some very basic questions you can ask students about physical features such as:

Do you like how you look?

Do you like your hairstyle?

Do you like what you wear out of school?

And then repeat these questions with ones about what they think others think about them.

From these physical feature questions, you could move to talk about who they mix with and why

What groups do you belong to and who do you get on with best?

I have had several students who have come to me wanting to know why they annoy some of their friends. Sometimes we find when analysing the groups they belong to that they go group hopping, depending on how they are feeling and through doing this, some of their friends (often the most popular students) feel that they are being disloyal to them and the group.

One student told me that his friends were annoyed with him because sometimes he wanted to be with them (the noisy group) and at other times he wanted to be with the quiet group. We tried to think of strategies together so that he could explain to the noisy group why he needed these quieter times. (We identified that he was a complete mix of an introvert and an extrovert).

Some students want to change their image, but don't have the confidence or parental backing to do so. This can mean involving parents in the discussion which can be helpful. On those occasions I act as the 'go between' with parents coming into school.

These meetings can be a free discussion or have a fixed agenda devised by the student.

Note: Image may not seem important when you are older, but to a fourteen year old it can mean the difference between being happy and achieving, or being miserable and underachieving.

## **Attitudes**

A student came to me and said he was racist, like his father, and that he had been encouraged to give his honest views in a lesson, but then had been criticised.

It may be that you hear things from students that rub you up the wrong way, or go against your values and principles, but the whole point of AERO is to help students explore who they are and the network around them.

In a timescale of about ten minutes, this student told me several times that he was racist, like his dad, but as he told me he was in floods of tears.

We met the following day not because of the racism, but because by being open the student had received a negative response from the teacher concerned and the student became confused and then distressed by what he saw as hypocrisy. "Why should she ask us to be open if she can't listen to our views" he asked me. The student had decided that he didn't want to attend any of her lessons again because of the way that she reacted.

This particular student had been coming to student services on and off for about two years and was labelled as 'the student who was trying to get out of lessons,' but on this occasion he was very

distressed. By analysing the roots of his attitudes he began to be calmer and we could begin to explore who he really was, why he had these views and what the impact of these views would be on him in different settings.

It is important to let students know that they can believe anything, but if their views are off the mainstream, it is useful for them to explore why they have these beliefs, how they put their beliefs over to others, and any legal or moral consequences.

Statistical information can be helpful here

Questions such as:

How many people do you think have the same views as you?

Students who come along having had bust-ups with their friends and who feel the loneliness and isolation, often believe that no one wants to know them.

When you discuss the attitudes of their group[s] sometimes they feel that they don't want to belong to a particular group anymore, and then statistics about different groups can be helpful.

One student was very miserable. She had about a dozen friends who, she felt were all against her, but put in the context of there being 840 students in the school, she could see a chance of finding others who would believe in and befriend her.

It is often quite helpful to get students to do a chart of the network around them. Pick one of their strong views and ask them to see what they think would be the views of the network around them. As they are in a school setting, it is important to include teachers in their network.

Students often have strong likes and dislikes for specific teachers and it is helpful to get them to explore why they have these views, and how this impacts on their subject choices.

### **Assumptions**

Students often come with fixed assumptions. It is helpful for them to explore these assumptions.

You can do this by looking at different roles and ask questions such as.

Who does the shopping in your house and why?

Who pays for things?

What do you expect of your parents and what do they expect of you?

I have found that when I have had meetings with students and their parents together that it is quite helpful for both sides to come prepared with a list of assumptions.

Example agenda

Item	Student's View	Parent's View	Agreed Compromise
Staying out	10pm in week, Midnight at weekends	10pm all the time	Student's view as long as homework is completed
Friends	Parents don't like my friends	Don't know your friends	Invite friends home to get to know them
Going to town	Can't get there and parents won't take	Don't like you hanging around	Go to agreed activity
Course work choice of subject	Want to do drama	Don't see the value of drama. What about jobs later	Do drama outside school e.g. youth theatre

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I act as the arbiter and negotiator when it comes to planning compromises.

For every time that a student assumes something and is right, there is probably at least another time when they are proven to be wrong.

Do not assume that discussion is always the best way to work through issues. A student can write stories or draw to show they feel.

Along with assumptions comes 'labelling'. A student who has acted up in lessons may come with a label and may assume that he will always be treated in a specific way by teachers and/or parents, but working through these assumptions with these parties separately or together can lead to changes. Many students come saying that they are fed up with being labelled and just want to be 'me'.

We explore what 'me' is

One student said that she told 'people' "I'm not a can of soup on a shelf in a shop"

### **Education**

Some students immediately pick 'education' and say that what they want is to do well at school and then go on to college or university. I have come across very few who want to go straight into work. We look at what education is about and many are astute and see that it is just as much about making friends as doing GCSEs.

Students are able to share the pressures caused by their fear of failing. They are also able to talk about what achieving might bring them in the future.

Not many students pick this as their first choice, but it often comes early on, and they will discuss subjects such as citizenship as being boring and irrelevant.

For some students the whole idea of getting from 14 to 16, when they can leave school, is torture and encouraging them to see it in a more relevant way can help them engage in rather than disengage from their classes.

Questions such as:

Is education important?

What do your parents think about education?

This can help the students learn a lot about themselves. Remember that it is ok to share how you got on at school. Students are often surprised when I tell them that I was a school phobic and want to know how I became a social worker.

### **Intellect**

There are students that I have come across who are not very good at reading and writing and all that is required for GCSEs, but they can be brilliant on an instrument or a computer and have a natural intellect.

I have worked with a student who struggled academically, but he could compose the most fantastic and complicated pieces on the piano, but couldn't read or write music so, instead, he recorded his pieces.

When he played a piece to me, he had never played to anyone else before other than his family or music teacher. Playing to an 'outsider' has had a 'knock on' effect. This young person, who was very introverted, has gained dramatically in confidence and is mixing with a number of students. He also now knows what he would like to do and how to go about trying to achieve his goal.

Encourage students to share their talents with you. Get them to show their artwork, read a poem or play some music to you.

### **Reinventing Schools**

Tell the Student that they have been given the task of reinventing schools for the country. Ask them:

- 1] How would their school be organised?
- 2] Who would fund it?
- 3] What difficulties could they see in their structure?

Remind them that the schools must produce young people who would be able to support themselves as adults and contribute financially to the country to support the increasing older population.

You will be amazed how conservative most students really are.

Give the student paper, pens etc. and leave them for a while on their own to do this task.

When you return to them, be quite critical of their plan and how it would work. Then remind them of how critical they may have been about the current systems.

You can give them a free hand or direct them to areas such as:

- 1] What subjects should be taught?
- 2] Where should they be taught?

- 3] Who should teach them?
- 4] What times should they be taught?

You should remember the philosophy of AERO when discussing their ideas remembering to balance Aspirations with Realism. Your student may come up with some ideas, which could help life to be better in your school so remember to encourage free thinking initially.

### **The Theme drawing**

You have a student who is finding it difficult talking, but also seems incredibly burdened. Leave them to draw.

Either direct what they draw or give them a free choice.

They could draw significant things that have happened at different times in their lives, or people who matter to them and later describe why. Reassure them that stick people will do or even an abstract drawing with or without colour. Give them space to do it on their own.

### **The 100% happiness model**

Ask a student to score out of 100% how happy they are feeling. If the student scores below 50% try to get them to work out what would make them feel happier and whether there is a way of working towards this.

This is a good tool as you can measure over time how happiness has increased or swings.

I had one student who put herself as low as 25%. She decided that she needed to tell her Mum things, but couldn't so she wrote her Mum a letter, read it to me and we supplied her with an envelope. She gave the letter to her Mum that evening because we insisted. Her Mum knew I was seeing her daughter, but hadn't realised how unhappy she was. They spent time together and the next time I met with the student she scored herself at 85%. She never felt that low again as she knew that her Mum would now listen

### **Get it all out in story form**

Lots of students' heads are buzzing with worries, anger, and fear and they want to control their heads, but just don't know what to do.

Give them three bizarre items and ask them to write you a story.

Try a bus, something red and a pickled onion. This frees them up to talk about or write about other things, but also makes them realise that you are not grilling them. A smile generally comes on their faces too.

### **Write how you feel**

I had a student who spent a whole lesson with me talking about all sorts of issues. She had a double lesson of the same subject and really wanted more time with me, but I already had another student to see and so I got her to spend the second period writing how she was feeling at that moment.

She wrote in detail about her physical feelings and that no one understood how she was feeling. With her permission this information was used as part of a referral to CAMHS [Child Adolescent Mental Health service] a few days later after a school meeting with her very caring Mum.

I continued to meet with her using the AERO model until they were able to take on her case and most importantly at her pace. She had been coming for support from Student Services for over a year and had felt the same way for several years. Writing how she felt has, hopefully, helped her move from 'Limbo' to greater happiness.

### **The A-Z of good, bad, annoying, frustrating etc**

There are many ways to use A-Z lists. Sometimes students need to get things down in some logical order.

They can either take their list away to ponder on wherever they want or keep it in their file for them to refer to at a later stage.

You could try an A-Z of their favourite music or TV programmes as a start so to put them at their ease. Your lack of knowledge about Pop groups or other topics is good because it means that the student can become the expert and become enthused by their interest thus distracting them from whatever has caused their current distress or frustration.

### **The Constructive or Distractive walk**

Most schools have somewhere to walk and many have quite a lot of grounds.

I sometimes take students out for a walk and either discuss constructive things in a freer environment or just get students to appreciate the world again by looking at trees, clouds, in fact anything that doesn't relate to them and their concerns directly.

The pitfalls of doing this are that students may see fellow students en route who make snide comments or fun banter.

You will have to know your student before you try this but if you do it fairly regularly then other students will get used to you doing it and not see it as extraordinary.

### **Finding the Talents and using them**

I have found that quite a lot of students have talents that either other people don't know about or never take any notice of. For example I have had students who write amazing poems or lyrics, others who do fantastic art and others who compose and play quite complex pieces of music.

You have the opportunity to appreciate these talents.

Get a student to write you a poem, or draw you a picture. Take time to get the student to find a piano or drum kit in school and play you that tune. It's highly enjoyable and it will help students to work through other issues.

### **Remember Mum/ Dad/ Grans/ Friends**

I have students who are unhappy, unsettled or angry because of the loss of a parent or other close family member or friend. They find that in the case of their Mum dying that their Dad can't talk about her because he finds it too upsetting, but the student wants to talk about her. One student whose mum died of cancer said that he didn't want to let go, he wanted to remember everything about her and so we had a session together celebrating who she was.

We talked about the music that she liked, the funny things about Mum, the annoying things about Mum. The smells and colours that reminded the student of Mum, his spiritual or non-spiritual feelings and the fact that he could enjoy discussing memories of his Mum.

This exercise could be adapted to any family member or friend who has died of natural or accidental causes. I also think it could be adapted to families who have had members who have committed suicide, but it would need additional careful planning beforehand.

A student sat with her Mum and me and we looked together at family photographs and the Mum was able to talk about her Grandad and the funny things that they used to do together.

The student within a short time became much happier and more settled in school.

### **The Lesson Timeline**

This is a method that I used with a young person to get him to look at what went wrong in his lessons and when he became disruptive.

We did two time lines:

- a) When he had a reasonable lesson,
- b) When he had a bad lesson.

In the lesson the first ten minutes were tied up with settling in class and the teacher discussing the task for that lesson. Then he did five minutes of work followed by his display of disruption after which he was ejected from the lesson.

In timeline a) he would be out of the lesson for five minutes. After his return he worked well for about fifteen minutes before he became disruptive again and was then ejected from the lesson. He returned to the lesson and worked for another ten minutes before being ejected again.

In timeline b) after being ejected he was left outside the classroom for the rest of the lesson.

In this exercise you can ask a number of questions such as:

- 1) How did you feel at each stage?
- 2) How did you feel when you were outside of the classroom?
- 3) What implications does this have for you and this teacher?

4] What do the other students think of you?

5] What do your parent(s) feel about this?

6] Do you want to change? If so why?

### **Realism**

It is really good for students to aspire and for you to encourage them, but each of these must be set in the context of realism.

Many of the students that I work with have two more years of state education to complete [this will increase to four when the school age increases to eighteen] and so there is no point in me helping them to resolve whatever their difficulties are without putting them in the context of school.

The words that tend to come up, when looking at realism, are loyalties, stereotypes, age and external influences, which I will discuss further.

General Questions you can discuss in the context of realism are:

1] The law says that you have to stay at school until you're 16 [it will be 18] so you'll just have to accept that. How can we work together to make this a positive experience?

2] Do you know what will happen if you get excluded/ or don't come to school?

Note: You need to have the information to share with the student but also encourage them by telling them that if they try to change, you will support them fully.

3] If you didn't come to school what would you do instead? What about your school friends?

4] It is your job to come to school and there is nothing you can do about it.

You can discuss the rights and wrongs about school and put them into an historical and cultural context e.g. at 14 you could have been down the pit or in service.

You can discuss how the state funds everyone.

I have found students very responsive to all of these types of discussions.

### **Loyalties**

I often find that even though students don't like the situations that they are in, they have a deep sense of loyalty towards all sorts of people including those who may cause them distress or unhappiness. They will often put the feelings of others before their own.

The Guider should be someone they can 'blast off' to who is neutral, but who asks questions that enable the student to consider where they fit into their network.

It often helps students to draw diagrams of who they are loyal to and why. This can particularly be the case when they are talking about friends that they have had for years, but they know oppress them.

On occasions there are things that students would like to say to parents about loyalties to extended family members and I help them decide how to do this or even invite parents to school or do home visits with students to help them.

Diagrams can be complex and time consuming, but they are there as a future tool for students to refer to when they want to.

I encourage students to take them home, but many want to leave a copy at school for them to look at in the future.

Questions such as

1] Who do you get on with best?

2] Who is good fun?

Can help the student be freed up to talk about the pressures of living within their network.

Rebecca's network

Rebecca had lost her Nan to cancer three years before and said that her Mum got too upset talking about her, but she (Rebecca) wanted to.

I had the arena to let her talk about her network.

She liked Uncle Stephen's girlfriend Rachel, but her Mum didn't like Rachel and so she felt uncomfortable and was pulled between her loyalty to her Mum and her natural friendship with Rachel.

Rachel's step sister Hayley was in her English class at school and was bullying her, but she didn't want to say anything otherwise her Mum would stop her from seeing Uncle Stephen and Rachel.

Note: Although this is a fictitious scenario it is not at all unusual and could mean that a student might underachieve in a subject, and go down a group in order to avoid another student.

Sometimes using the introvert/extrovert chart can help students realise why they are loyal to certain people and whether these are healthy relationships.

#### Rebecca's Chart

Rebecca is a slim, attractive student who with friends is 6 on the chart and in most lessons is 4, which means that she is able to answer questions, but is not too noisy.

In English she has placed herself as 2 because of the presence of Hayley who she regards as one of the popular girls. She is a 7 in the playground and a 4 in English.

Rebecca was predicted to get C for her English until I looked at the school records and find that she got level 5 on her year 6 SATS and is still predicted a 5 on her year 9 SATS and although she appears to be doing ok in her English, in fact, for her potential she is underachieving and she should be heading for a B or A.

Note: It is therefore important that the Guider has some knowledge about their potential early on when meeting with a student.

It is no good helping a non- academic student to aspire to 'A' level Maths, but also there are many students I have found aiming for C's who might achieve B's and A's if only they could be happier.

Rebecca might never be able to get her Mum to like Rachel, but she might learn to understand why it is important for Rebecca to spend time with Rachel.

#### Kyle's world

Kyle places himself as 3 in class and 7 with friends. He belongs to two groups one group is made up of 4 male students who are all around 4 on the introvert/extrovert chart. He feels ok with them, but gets itchy feet and also joins the other group with a mixture of girls and boys who are mostly 6 or 7's. He feels pulled between the groups.

Try these questions to encourage him to talk about them:

- 1] Are your friends from school or home or both?
- 2] What activities do you do with each group?
- 3] What do you like about the different groups?
- 4] Do you have any difficulties being in the groups?
- 5] What is your role in the groups? Are you the leader or one of several leaders, or perhaps the clown?
- 6] Who makes the decisions in your group about what you do as a group?
- 7] What's good and bad about being in the group(s)?

Some students are completely miserable when they fall out with their friends, to the extent that it makes them academically dysfunctional. They have to find a way to sort out why their friends don't like them anymore before they can continue with their studies. In extreme cases they will withdraw from school and then this places additional pressures on them from their parents and the state when their attendance percentages drop.

Providing a means to help them look at their situation realistically can avoid them disrupting their own studies.

#### **Stereotypes**

Over the years I have come to the conclusion that most students like to be similar not different. Sadly the way that schools function, a young person can quite quickly be stereotyped by their behaviour or appearance and thus become different.

If I had my way I would have Psychology as a central subject for all secondary school students, because I believe it would give them a greater understanding of the impact of different forms of behaviour.

Students who are quiet and unassuming may be left to drift and not reach their potential. Similarly, the noisy, loud mouths who walk out of lessons get labelled as disruptive and it can be difficult, because of their history, to change their behaviour if they want to.

Students who come to me and use the 'who' diagram quickly learn about themselves. We often assume that stereotyping is bad when we are unhappy with our lives.

When a student picks stereotypes, it is best for them to interpret what it means to them rather than you lead the discussion.

I had one student who got angry in nearly every lesson and for most of a year spent significant periods of time away from his class.

I was asked to work with him and we looked at who he was and what he was about, starting with his aspirations.

This young man wanted to be a medical doctor and so we looked together at his academic achievements and his potential. There was a huge deficit. He was underachieving and got bored being placed in a lower stream.

Understanding stereotypes in the context of the real world really helped this student.

He liked straight talking. He liked to be told that he had to change and he did and now is a good student, who we rarely see.

His early childhood was plagued with difficulties, but a team of people is helping him through all of that. Making him aware that he was playing to his stereotype helped him move away from it.

I asked him the following questions, which might be helpful with other students.

1] Do you get stereotyped? If so, how and by whom?

They may say they don't, but this is unlikely. Most students are quite clear about the fact that they do and will talk about being forced to wear certain clothes and listen to certain music when what they really want to do is mix and match.

You can go on to ask:

2] Does it matter about being stereotyped? Aren't we all?

Give an example of how it has happened to you.

It is at this point that students may wish to use diagrams to show how different people are stereotyped so it is important always to have paper and pens freely available in case the student's thoughts come pouring out and they want to record them.

Remember that the whole point of AERO is to help students change for the better, and so you should ask additional questions such as:

3] Can we change anything?

4] What impact does this stereotyping have on your life or people that matter to you?

Stereotyping can be linked to assumptions and personality traits. In other words if you like certain music and, for example, are viewed as an 'Emo' then it is assumed that you dabble with thoughts of death.

You can check this out by asking:

5] Are you happy?

The student may have picked stereotypes just because it's a word they know and may want you to direct them to another word.

Remember you are their Guider and you don't need to discuss every word on the chart, only those that feel right to them or which you feel might help them be happier and aim towards their goals in life.

### **Age**

Age usually comes up early in discussions. The school I worked in had students aged 13-18 years old. Many of the students I came across were 14 years old and had two more years of formal school to go through. The interesting thing is how old they feel in different circumstances.

The most extreme case I had was two friends who wanted to see me together, who both would like to remain at about six years old because it would mean that they would be looked after for several more years. Commonly students want to be 18 years old so that they can have more independence and drive a car.

Students often feel different ages in different situations and share their frustrations of being treated as if they were much younger children by their parents.

The other interesting thing about age is how quite a lot of students have their lives mapped out and know what they would like to be doing at certain ages.

You can ask questions such as:

1] How old do you feel when you are in lessons? At home? With your friends?

2] Why do you feel these ages?

3] Does it matter feeling these ages?

Age is extremely good to discuss with students who disrupt and are thrown out of lessons. They will often tell you that even though they are chronologically 14 years old, when they are thrown out they feel as though they are something like 8 years old.

You can explore with them the discrepancy between them wanting to be 18, actually being 14 and behaving as though they are 8.

You can ask them:

1] Why do you think that you behave like an 8 year old?

2] What do the other students in the class think about your behaviour?

3] Do you want to change or is it ok to act like an 8 year old?

4] Who else acts like an 8 year old in your class?

5] Does anyone in your family act like this?

6] Are you happy with yourself when you act like this?

7] How can I help you to change?

Students generally know that they want to change and why they want to change.

Very often they are copying someone else's behaviour in the class to remain friends with them or to be given some attention. They may tell you that one of their parents or other family members acts in this way.

Remember to remind them that they are individuals, having their own, not somebody else's life to live and that it is ok to find what matters to them.

Students may say that it is their teacher that behaves in that way. If so, get them to be in their teacher's shoes having to deal with not only one student like them, but possibly several.

### **External influences**

Social Workers are used to networking, but it's amazing what a wide network some students have and what a narrow network other students have. They are all expected to do the same things whilst in school, mix with a lot of people with similar and different backgrounds, achieve the expected grades for their age groups and know where to fit into all of this. At times students really don't know where they fit and it all becomes overwhelming.

Many students come from reconstituted families with parents who are either on their own or who have found new partners. How they deal with all of this depends on not only their personality, but also how it has been presented to them. The student who didn't know that his Mum was his Mum until he was six, and thought she was his sister, showed suppressed anger through quietly self-harming.

His Mum thought that he had had quite a good childhood, but he felt very different when he compared his life with his friends. His anger was smouldering inside when he heard other students who seemed, to him, to have had idyllic childhoods complaining of having a row with their parents. He felt that if he said anything they just wouldn't understand, but he felt that I did. He was, in fact, wrong because I had one of those idyllic childhoods, but I could let him express what he was feeling.

Diagrams drawing the student's network can be helpful both to him and you.

You can direct the student to a particular network e.g. school friends or get them to freely draw their whole network and include teachers etc in this.

Students who have to go out of school to talk about issues and get help feel different. The Student who was scheduled to go to CAMHS twice a week for a year told me after six months that he didn't want to go, but had to and asked why they couldn't come and see him at school.

The 'Every Child Matters' agenda has meant that more professionals are coming into school, but there are still many who are distant from students' every day worlds.

I have found that, generally, external influences are the least of students' concerns. They generally do not see school as external, as it is such an integral part of their lives. There are students who only have friends at school and are desperately lonely during weekends and school holidays. I help them begin to

realise that they can have friends at school and home and find ways of helping them develop these outside friendships. The difficulty in seeking community groups is the blocking of many parts of the Internet by schools, due to abuses in the system, and the lack of time to use more traditional means of finding these resources.

Questions such as:

1] Can you draw your external network?

or

2] How does society affect you?

This can help students find where they fit into a whole network.

Very few students who come to me have had anything to do with social services and social workers, but they may know someone who has, so questions such as:

1] Do you know what social workers do?

This can lead to useful discussions

They also may not be aware of the laws about attending school, which are generally getting tighter. It is often helpful to show them their percentage attendance if this has become an issue, and to discuss the pressures that this puts on their parents.

Although students are still children they need to start to look at themselves in the context of the country as a whole, and so with certain students who seem to live in an unreal world I will talk to them about things such as taxation and benefits and how the country can provide sufficient money to provide for dependant people.

For those who stubbornly just don't want to come to school, I put school in the context of a job, but I find that these students are generally very few.

Some students are very frightened of the outside world and may not have done things such as get a bus into town on their own by the time they are fourteen. In these situations it is important to tread carefully and involve parents in the discussions.

I generally find that students are far less independent than my generation, but with rather higher 'pink gloss' expectations. I don't want to burst their bubble, but they do need to live in the real world. Not everyone can be a pop star!

### **Openness**

Openness has a section of its own because it needs emphasising.

When Students come to me it's of their own choice. There is no compulsion, and whatever is said about confidentiality there are so many situations where you just can't keep things in complete confidence.

When making notes you should let students know who can have access to these notes. I have only had one student who didn't want anyone else in school to see them and one who didn't want to share them with his Mum.

In your role as Guider you must respect these views although your open discussions must consider why.

I therefore tell students right at the beginning that I will only share things where I have to, but that it is helpful to keep notes of discussions.

I believe that for too many years, social workers have been dishonest and that, in fact, there is very little that we can keep completely confidential, because the reality is that we don't know what people are going to tell us, which may have implications for their safety or that of others.

Imagine that a young person shares their suicidal thoughts in detail with you, which they can easily do and then you don't share that with anyone. It might be perfectly fine, you may be able to work through it together, but there is still that chance that they will carry out the act and not only will you be distressed, but your job will be 'on the line' and your ability to support future students will be in question.

Remember that is the whole point of AERO. It's a tool to support children.

What we can usually do, however, is time how, when and where we share the information that we have been given. This needs to be discussed openly with the person that is giving us the information.

I have parents that come to see me, who say that they don't want their children to know because they won't like the fact that their parents have come into school. In most cases I encourage them to tell their

children as soon as possible, because school is a small community and a friend or someone else may tell the child that they saw their parent come into school.

There are students who come and spend several sessions with me before they are ready to tell their parents and we plan how they will tell them.

Sometimes this is verbally, at other times it is in writing.

Be prepared for negative responses from parents. Not all parents are supportive of their children, but the vast majority are. They may be upset that their child has come to talk to you rather than them, but generally they are pleased that their child has come to talk to someone.

Openness is about not telling students what they should do, but exploring different options and the possible or likely consequences and outcomes.

Most of the time I get students to choose the words off the 'who' chart, but sometimes I tell students that I want them to consider particular words, and why.

When we plan follow up sessions, we talk openly about whether they feel they should (or want to) come to talk more, or whether I do and why.

I also check out that coming to see me isn't just a way of avoiding lessons or particular teachers.

A like or dislike for a particular lesson is often still attributable to a particular teacher, as it was when I was at school.

When discussions involve child protection issues [which I find is very rare compared with the large number of students that I see] students know that I have to share information with the Child Protection co-ordinator, but I always do it with the student present, with one of the three of us sitting together and me encouraging the student to repeat what they have told me.

As a Guider it is also important to be open with whoever supervises you.

Remember that at times your mind will be buzzing with information that students have given you some of which may have to be passed on.

As a pioneer I have found that supervision in school is practically non-existent and so you may need to set up your own support system outside school.

The difference between school and area social work is that generally area social workers only work with cases that have become a crisis and time limited, but school social work is proactive working at the pace of the student. In school I am having an increasing number of students coming to see me who have hidden worries and concerns that they have had for years and not shared for fear of social workers and 'being taken into care'.

Schools are communities with grapevines, and so students who come and see me will tell their friends what happened and what I do with them. Their friends may appear on the surface to be coping well with life, but inside they don't feel that they are.

Openness is about recognising these grapevines and networks and being able to know what to share and what not to share, but also about telling students why you yourself can and can't share.

It's important for the Guider to be up to date with out of school news so that you know that if one student comes to visit because they are distressed, for example, after a friend has been killed in a car crash that weekend, then the chances are that more students will come as well, but amongst those students may be one who has years of pain lurking beneath a 'get on with life' appearance.

It could be just the right time for her to share that pain.

### **AERO evolving**

AERO has been used by several hundred children at Wolgarston High School. The majority got something from it, a few dismissed it and a minority made dramatic change to the way that they saw the world and behaved. The boy who is quoted after the extrovert introvert chart on page 27 became a happy sixth former who after not seeing around for some time came up to me one day and spontaneously said 'you know those words and that chart thing they really helped me'

That gave me a fuzzy, warm feeling and the encouragement to go on. I only have to visualise him saying that and I feel so much more positive.

One of the key factors is that AERO becomes infectious and that when you learn how to use it, you help other people too. However what you need to do is go beyond its obvious use with single children and expand it into other directions.

### **Additional words**

You can always add new trigger words and here are just three that I would add for now

### **Boredom**

What is boredom?

What impact does it have on our lives?

Why do some people get bored and others never claim to be?

I find that I can get bored very regularly do you?

I found that some children misbehave just because they are bored.

### **Fear**

There are things that many of us fear and we either avoid or try to face. Some can impact on our lives dramatically such as a fear of flying if you want a career that needs travelling. There are other fears that you don't want anyone to know about because you feel that people would laugh at you.

Be prepared for all fears being shared with you and acknowledge the fact that some people may laugh remember Openness.

### **Grief**

I wanted to add this word because I feel that it is something that affects everyone differently. When my daughter died as a baby I was encouraged to join a group to talk about my grief. This was exactly the wrong thing for me to do.

Adding it to a list means that someone can pick it and like any of the words you can say "And what does it mean to you?"

There are theorists that believe that we go through certain stages and maybe some people do, but I am one of many who didn't. Grief for me fluctuates, but for others it may present as behaviour.

One of my son's friends ended up being excluded from school through grief. He told me many years later that no one ever tried to explore with him why he felt so angry.

### **Study of year tens who had three or more subjects below their targets**

The starting point for the research was to look at how many of the 215 students [122 boys and 93 girls] in year ten fitted the brief of being below in three or more of their targets.

There were 57 children who fitted this brief. The research took a four week period over three days a week with the intention of interviewing all students personally however the nature of the research meant that there were a few students who wanted at least one follow up meeting with me to discuss issues in their lives and help to explore some solutions. This was done principally using AERO

I was therefore unable to try to interview 9 children [7 girls and 2 boys] 2 from pathway 1 and 7 from pathway 2 who were not available for one or more reasons [off sick, off site, doing a test, not in a timetabled classroom, long term non- attendance and 1 who was excluded] Their attendance ranged from 47.3% at the lowest to 96.3%

There were 3 children who were already known and actively receiving support from an assistant Head teacher and so they are also not included in the interviews.

Of the 45 children interviewed there were 17 girls and 28 boys

The girls were made up of the following

1 from pathway 1

15 from pathway 2

1 from pathway 3

The boys were made up of the following

2 from pathway 1

23 from pathway 2

3 from pathway 3

Of the original 57 students all names were recognised by the two workers in family and Student Services. They had or were still actively working with 17 girls out of 25 in the original study and 8 boys out of 32 in the original study.

The aim was to talk to each child for approximately 10 minutes with only one child at a time taken out of lessons to have the minimum level of disruption to the teachers. Some children talked for longer than this. Children who felt that they needed to talk more booked a separate appointment with me. There were 2 girls that did this, one who had so many issues in her life that I saw on three occasions, the other I saw once.

There were 4 boys who asked for follow up appointments. 3 I only saw on one occasion the 4th wanted to meet each week [3 appointments] and asked if there was anyone he could talk to after I left who was not a teacher. His issues were about his own identity and coping with his feelings of isolation. He would not fit into any of the external services criteria.

The children were asked four questions and for any other comments:

**1] Did you read your school report?**

**2] Did you know that you were below target on 3 or more of your subjects? How did you feel about this?**

**3] Why do you think you were below on 3 or more of your subjects?**

**4] Can you think of any ways that school can help you achieve your targets?**

#### **Question 1**

Only one child hadn't read his report

#### **Question 2**

The majority of children were disappointed about their results and had some idea that they were not doing as well as they could. A few were ok about their results and knew what they could do to improve them

One student was angry saying that "it wasn't an accurate picture of how she was doing"

One girl said that she was upset "I know I've got the brain to do good"

One girl was very disappointed saying that all her other reports were above or on target and that her Mum and dad were not too happy.

A girl in pathway 3 was happy with her result

One boy in pathway 1 said "I tried my best"

One boy said that he felt like "a dumb ass"

One boy who got above in Humanities was disappointed by his other results and shocked by his Humanity result.

One boy said that he didn't like it [his report] and some results were right and others were wrong

#### **Question 3**

There were a variety of reasons given for not achieving the targets one girl said that she had missed tests being poorly and didn't get her projects in on time.

The majority of children cited lessons that they didn't like or understand.

One child said "some teachers can't control the class so this puts me off"

Another commented, which was supported by a couple of others that the topics were changed too quickly and that not enough notice was given for doing the essays.

A child felt that most teachers don't explain things and had been told "I'm not doing the project for you"

Several students recognised that they talked too much but they also weren't good at asking for help when they got stuck.

Some children made generalised comments whereas others wanted to discuss in detail each subject that they were below on and reasons for this.

Several children talked about seating plans. Some liked them, others wanted to sit next to someone they know who they could discuss the work with if they get stuck.

A few children said that they had a problem with their memory and would like help in developing a different way of remembering things.

A few children said that they didn't get on with particular teachers but didn't know why, they found the subjects boring and just switched off.

#### **Question 4**

Some children had a clear idea of what they wanted to do in the future and what they needed to achieve these aims others hadn't any idea and would have liked the chance to explore what they wanted to do.

Some children were able to ask for help but others weren't

A few children could cope with disruptive children in the class but others found that it stopped their learning

One child said that the teacher was too busy sorting out naughty children and so didn't give praise to those who are working.  
Some children were able to compare the different teaching styles and what worked for them.  
One girl felt that she needed more feedback on her work not knowing how she could improve it.  
One girl said that she switched off in English because it was too complex spending half an hour on one word.  
One boy in pathway 3 said "no one ever really praises me they only tell me when I've done bad things"  
One child said "I just need to get my head down and do it"  
A child felt that homework should be co-ordinated better between subjects. He gave the example of being given a 4 hours essay on a Monday to do by Wednesday and then given small pieces of work to give in on Thursday which he forgot to do because of the stress linked to the bigger piece of work.

The 'any other comments' section were variable and so it is best to refer to the sheets.

### **General comment**

All of the children interviewed were happy to talk and were honest about how they felt. The majority when collected from the classroom felt that they may have done something wrong but were visibly relaxed when told that they were 1 of 50 plus students being interviewed.

What this research showed me was how important it is to have someone like me in schools who isn't involved on a day to day basis with either the teaching of children or their general welfare, someone who can take a look at what's happening by exploring different avenues.

Children are often split into different categories either because it's seen as the most effective way to teach them e.g. the different pathways due to their academic abilities but also through their reputation. Whilst doing the research I asked the children whether they felt that the targets were a real picture of their abilities or whether they could do even better than this and many said that they could do much better. We then discussed how they could be encouraged to do much better and several children felt that given more active encouragement they could.

This has been a bug bear throughout the whole of my life that the noisiest children get more than those that just get on with their work and without any prompting this is what many of the children told me. Several didn't have a clue what they wanted to do in the future which I acknowledged as 'normal' but they also didn't have any great hobbies or passions in life so the point of doing well just for the sake of it was also lacking.

What showed above all in my discussions was that most of the children loved having the opportunity to just say what they felt with no come back and visibly returned to their classes smiling and looking relaxed where many had looked nervous when I collected them.

I remembered how nervous and stupid that I felt within school and at other times in my life and could see this also being developed in the faces of the 'invisible' children.

The bottom slice talks about the future through my eyes but before we enter this world I just want to say what a wonderful opportunity that I was given at Wolgarston .

Whatever grumbles there were along the journey they were all worth it and to spend my last few weeks talking to these children was a treat.

### **Tom**

I leave you with my time with Tom, this isn't his name but his story says why social workers, school detectives or whatever you want to call them should be in all schools across the UK.

Tom was in what Wolgarston called pathway two, that meant that he was one of the many invisible children who seem to be getting along ok with life. Looking at his results he was doing fine getting a couple of A's quite a lot of B's and an odd D and so academically no one would be concerned about Tom. But when I sat talking to him he was confused about life and who he was. His parents had split up a couple of years before and as an only child he found himself even more alone when his parents didn't cope well with their new lives. Tom didn't know what he wanted to do. He had a group of male friends but found himself sitting on the outside of the group. He wanted to meet each week with me just to find out more about himself and asked if when I left that there was anyone he could talk to occasionally he didn't want to talk to a teacher, he wanted to talk to someone like me who he wouldn't see every day in his lessons. But Tom didn't have suicidal thoughts, didn't have a disability and wasn't disruptive in his lessons or bereaved in the traditional sense. He got on with the work and muddled through when he got stuck because the teachers were too busy with the disruptive children and when he

asked for help they told him the same way and then got annoyed when he said that he still didn't understand. So Tom wouldn't fit into any criteria's of outsiders  
All I could do is give Tom two books that might help him. I hope I meet Tom when he is an adult some day and find out how he got on.  
Our mad world has to change because I believe that people like Tom have so much to offer us but can often be invisible feeling sad and confused.

### **The bottom slice**

#### **Looking to the future and making predictions**

Is this arrogant or scary?

Over the years I have made predictions that no one has really listened to, but now I suppose I think 'what the hell, they can either listen or smirk', but if we look at the future through the eyes of AERO then surely what hits us immediately is the harsh reality.

One of the New Year stories of 2011 was that by 2060 there would be about 600,000 people living until they are 100 and so we have to rethink several things in life.

#### **Robot carers, companions and protectors**

I got laughed at when I spoke many years ago about us having Robot carers when we were older.

Personally I'm happy to have mine. I'd call him John after my other half and I hope that he would be able to talk with John's accent and would know loads of details about my life and the people that have mattered to me throughout it. I would also hope that he could take me out even when I didn't feel like going so that I could keep fully involved in my community.

This may be seen as a long way away but as I write the team at Bristol University and UWE are linking in with some Dutch folk working on a Robot carer.

#### **Controversial stuff**

I can see a day coming fairly soon when teachers won't want to teach disruptive children anymore. Some schools already have 'sin bins' where 'naughty' children are placed and martyrs called learning mentors or other terms of monitors are left for most of the day trying to contain at the worst and educate at the best these disruptive children.

But very few schools actually have money to employ someone like me to take some of these children and explore with them directly why they behave the way that they do.

The controversial stuff that I am talking about is placing these children in electronically controlled pods as forms of time out.

Of course these children would be on the extreme end of the behaviour and so schools would be reluctant to invest in such gadgets even if they did exist. I see them as the sort of thing that they use on a game show like 'Mr and Mrs' where the Mr has to answer the questions about each other before the 'Mrs'

#### **AERO a philosophy from birth- up for debate**

Let's think about our birth and who is involved with us from that very first day and who should be involved with us afterwards.

Much has been said about 'the Nanny state' a so called interfering busy body style of upbringing. We also talk about child protection or most recently safeguarding but what are we protecting physical life or human potential and why?

It seems to me that we get so trapped up in isms that we forget the basics encompassed in AERO.

Even more than that we are not brought up to give as well as take by the Nanny state, if it does exist.

If giving was seen as crucial to being a human being then the stories in the media would have much more balance between giving and taking. Why is giving something that is done quietly unless you are a big organisation or during a big event such as BBC children in need.

Let's return to that day we were born or even before that. Why and who created us? Did they actively decide that they wanted to create us, or were we the product of a 'moment'? What came after that 'moment', happiness mixed with complete positive steps towards that day following the best advice or muddle, confusion, denial.

Of course these statements are the two extremes, life isn't as simple as that and those that are happy at the beginning may be sad, angry or confused by that birth day and those that had a negative time initially may find that happiness by the day but what matters most using the AERO philosophy is that by that day you have some understanding of your situation and know who is there to celebrate or support you on that day and beyond that day.

With the AERO approach any Nanny style support is subtle most of the time, but laced with reality. Reality doesn't have to be hard it can just be reality.

You, as that parent have responsibility to and for your child as your parent/s had to you and that responsibility includes your child being healthy and being able to go to school.

So if you decide not to immunise your child and your child gets ill you take responsibility for your action, so don't get uppity if the state nags you for what you chose not to do. The state was giving you the jabs free of charge.

When it comes to school you know that the state in law says that every child from the age of five [they should sort that one out] has to attend school full time.

So if this is the case why do we have home schooling? Personally I just don't understand that one. If they get schooled at home how do they ever get the nerve to go to University and/ or go out to work? but that's open to debate.

The AERO philosophy encourages debate and challenges traditional ways and thoughts. Children who have used AERO have learnt that my views and others aren't the only ones, that their views are equally valid.

So you are born and right at that point decisions have been made. Were you born in hospital which seems the most common, or at home which seems to take a deal of planning. A few of us were born somewhere unusual which means that even at birth we may have become a figure of interest to the press or local media.

For most of us until we reach school we are in the hands of the trend of the time.

Nowadays that's possibly one or two parents and a few other family folks somewhere around, but they might be a few or many miles away. The future may include Robots.

The range of families is variable with their attitudes to their children.

When it comes to working or not we have a strange system whereby a married Mum with a Dad around isn't expected to work, but an unmarried or loan parent is expected to work. This in itself sends different messages to children about who they are.

Many Mums choose to work. There are some Dads who choose not to work and get labelled by the state as dossers, layabouts or other such terms. It is believed that the child of a dosser or layabout is likely to have more chance of being a dosser or layabout than a child whose dad works. This is difficult to assess as research projects that are well funded are generally only carried out on small amounts of families but can often make large statements from their relatively small findings.

So where have we got with our new born?

They might have happy grown up gurgling noises around them, but what they most certainly will have is waves in their life to ride over. These can vary from a very young age, such as little waves such as crying at the first few days at play group when their Mum or dad disappears for what seems like forever outside that door when they are held by that strange smelling usually woman. They may have huge unpredictable crashing waves when their Mum or dad can't cope with the world that they need them to cope with. This could be lack of food or shouting or giving them no sense of aspirations at all. Their parent/s may never have really learnt how to play or forgotten how to play and leave them bored to find out for themselves propped in front of something that they get to know as the tele.

Life moves on at a fast pace for some and at a grinding slow pace for others and so by the time that they reach that place called school their view of things in life have some kind of form. For some children this form is rigid, for others it is flexible and malleable.

One child can be like a china doll where anything new can cause a crack. This can either be the child whose parent/s always worked and had an organised life, or the child whose parent/s were dossers and either had an organised or disorganised life.

You cannot assume that the parent/s who worked didn't do the same as the dossers placing their child in front of someone else's tele instead of their own. This is a cynical and negative view because both types of parent/s could have spent quality time with their children turning them into creative lively human beings.

So the child gets to school and immediately enters the world of assessment. They are assessed for this and that until they become an adult and maybe beyond that time. In fact in some ways they have been assessed even before that time. When could they sit up, walk, talk, catch a ball but one thing they were not assessed for was their happiness.

Very recently the state suddenly woke up and thought 'hey are our children happy?'

They then started to think about how they could make them happy finding that according to outsiders charts that our children were just not as happy as outsiders [ other countries children] But surely happiness is like the waves. It comes and goes like that grin on your face, it can't be there forever and if it is, is it true or just a figment of our imagination?

So the child continues to be assessed on what they can or can't do, not on how creative they are. Well there might be a bit of that, but currently it is only a bit of that. Wearing the correct school uniform in the correct way seems to become more important as a child gets older rather than encouraging an amazing imagination.

Children go through school often labelled at a young age as academic or not. School types change with government trends, but the academic or not label stays much the same over time. The Nanny state from time to time worries about the 'dossers' children not being given the same chances in life as the working family children and about the varied state of schools which are labelled as good, bad or something in the middle.

AERO stands for Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness and in itself as seen through this book aims to be a balanced recipe for life.

It is therefore important to have the encouragement to think about all sorts of things and to carry on being encouraged throughout our lives. I have hopefully shown through this book that we can, and should also take our personalities into account.

Some of the most successful people in life are the most chronic when it comes to understanding both themselves and the people that matter to them.

Historically there have been trends that have affected so many of us take for example women's liberation. I personally always believed in equality of the sexes rather than liberation because liberation means freedom, whereas equality links to compromise.

I believe that we should teach that new born to compromise and that from birth to death life should be about compromising but then like everything else with the AERO philosophy everything is up for debate.

### **Never Again**

I do not want any 14 year old ever again to be told on a Friday afternoon that if they don't go to school on the following Monday that they will be put into a children's home until they are 18 years old. That has had a lasting effect on me that makes me angry with those systems and passionate that they must change.

I believe that change has to be done in stepping stones mainly because we have a generation of professionals who have been told what to think and although some or even many may be able to think for themselves it will be hard for them to really recognise that this is what the Government want them to do. Defence mechanisms and 'watching your back' has become a product of the training of these professionals. They have become fearful of being condemned for saying the wrong thing.

I once remember writing in a report that a woman was 'west Indian' and was condemned by the manager for this. I said that this was how she described herself and was told that she was wrong. I mentioned this to the woman concerned in passing later on and she was very angry saying 'how dare this woman tell me what I want to call myself I am proud to be West Indian' I later told the manager what this woman had said but she didn't get it. She had been to anti discriminatory training and knew best she implied. Well did she, is all that I can say?

Tom was in pathway two, that meant that he was one of the many invisible children who seem to be getting along ok with life. Looking at his results he was doing fine getting a couple of A' s quite a lot of B' s and an odd D and so academically no one would be concerned about him. But when I sat talking to him he was confused about life and who he was. Tom didn' t have suicidal thoughts, didn' t have a disability and wasn' t disruptive in his lessons or bereaved in the traditional sense. He got on with the work and muddled through. He therefore officially had no one he could talk to.

There are children throughout the UK and the rest of the world feeling confused and frustrated by life.

AERO helps them explore anything and everything and find their own answers. It is a philosophy and approach that could appeal to all children and their families.

Rachel Bramble was a school phobic when she was fourteen years old missing six months of school. Although later becoming both a Community Worker and Social Worker and having a family of her own she always wondered why.

AERO [Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness] which is her model using trigger words and an introvert/ extrovert chart has made sense to her and helped others too.

I have been fortunate to see Rachel Bramble' s AERO model in practice and she achieved some remarkable results in a secondary school setting. She raises some important issues around the mental health of our young people and the huge pressures society places upon them and her approach deserves a wider airing.

**Tim Loughton MP**

**Member of Parliament for East Worthing & Shoreham**

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