

## **Supporting students whilst nurturing staff relations<sup>1</sup>; the practice and benefits of reflective practice groups for teachers (Belinda Moller)**

*‘...every attempt is a wholly new start and a different kind of failure’* **East Coker** by  
**TS Eliot**

The aim of a reflective practice group for teachers is *‘...to create a forum in which workers feel able to share issues, concerns and preoccupations that they would previously not have wanted others to know about – for instance due to shame, fear of exposure or possible criticism....it is what we do not want others to know about our work and professional practice that is so isolating and that therefore represents the most serious ‘load’ or anxiety – usually much more than the specific student, class or behaviour being described’* (Jackson 2008, 69).

Reflective practice groups are called different things in different contexts. In the UK, for instance, when working with teachers and Principals, they are sometimes called Work Discussion Groups (see Jackson 2008). Another model that is widely in use is The Balint Group (see [balint.co.uk](http://balint.co.uk)). This model was originally developed to support GPs in their patient work. Increasingly the model is being used with a range of professionals, including teachers and Principals. The term ‘Reflective’ is being used very deliberately here. The purpose is to clarify and differentiate a reflective group from other types of group meetings where an Agenda has previously been agreed and where concrete actions are usually an outcome.

### **What happens in a reflective practice group?**

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<sup>1</sup> This paper represents part of a presentation made at the Conference of Educate Together Principals on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2015 in Portlaoise, Ireland. My thanks to the audience for listening to the presentation, and for the interest that was shown afterwards.

Usually, between 4 to 10 teachers meet once a fortnight, or once a month for a fixed period of time. The time of each meeting varies from 45 minutes to 2 hours depending on the frequency of meetings. Ideally, a trained facilitator agrees, with the group, the expectations, ground rules and working structure. A member usually brings a 'case', a problem or an issue in which he or she may feel 'stuck'. The group may discuss 3-4 cases per meeting. The member shares the details of the case and then sits back and listens to her colleagues discussing and reflecting on what they have heard. Or, in a slightly different model, the presenting member will engage with the reflective discussion that follows. It is the reflective task and the quality of the reflections that makes this experience different. The group facilitator will encourage members not to give advice or solutions and not to interrogate or go into the historical details or background of the case. Rather, the members will be encouraged to talk about what they think, what they feel and to free associate about what they have heard. The role of the facilitator is to ensure that the group stay 'on task'; thinking and reflecting on the case and those involved. There are two aspects that the facilitator will spend a lot of time talking to the group about in the first few meetings –

1. How to maintain confidentiality and what confidentiality actually means in a school setting; this has to be fully negotiated and agreed with the group to protect the boundary and facilitate the authentic working of the group.

2. Clarifying the task and making sure that everyone understands how reflective capacity can be worked with and developed in a group. Reminding members that the task is to listen and to attune to the member in a different way. Focusing on the feelings, motivations, thoughts and the circumstances of those involved in the issue, to deepen understanding at an emotional and compassionate level, albeit allowing people the space to get feelings 'off their chests'.

## **In a reflective practice group, the outcomes and benefits are**

- A sense of validation, being understood and accepted having shared concerns/feelings
- An acknowledgement and a normalizing of the feelings and anxieties that staff experience with students (and with each other)
- To reach a deeper level of understanding of students' feelings and members' own feelings
- An improved sense of competent professionalism and the confidence to respond to day-to-day issues with more robust authority and ease

## **Practical issues and concerns**

Practical issues are the best way to think about how this initiative might be of use in a school and to carefully consider the particular setting of a school. It is also a good way to work through the concerns, disadvantages and sensitivities of this approach. The excellent Emil Jackson's article (see link attached) offers a clear breakdown of the practical issues that arise when considering a reflective group. The article also contains vignettes from real groups and signals clearly the benefits to staff.

## **How to get started?**

Every organization and therefore every school has a unique context, history and culture. Starting a conversation about a reflective practice group in your school, in and of itself, communicates a deep trust in your staff and a confident authority in your leadership approach. However, it takes time to get a group going. The value will be felt in the long-term not in the short-term. It takes time for a group to build a trusting culture and for members to begin to learn, and to apply the learning in their day-to-day practice.

Starting an informal, relaxed conversation with your staff is probably the best way to encourage thinking together. You may be just planting a seed that will be picked up at another time, or you may find there is a real interest in accessing a deeper awareness of teaching practice.

See Jackson's article for a discussion on how groups can also be misused and how to manage that. For a deeper discussion about the impact and benefits of reflective groups for teachers, see Warman and Jackson, (2007). This provides the details of a study that assessed reflective practice groups in schools in London over a 3-year period.

## **References**

- Jackson, Emil. 2008. 'The Development of work Discussion Groups in Educational Settings' in *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*. Vol. 34 No.1 pages 62-82.
- Warman, A. and Jackson, E. 2007. 'Recruiting and retaining Children and Families: Social Workers: the potential of work discussion groups' in *Journal of Social Work Practice*. Vol. 21 (1) pages 35-48.