

Facilitating Work Discussion Groups with Staff in Complex Educational Provisions

Ellis, Gemma and Wolfe, Victoria

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from an exploratory study of ‘work discussion groups’ (WDGs) conducted with groups of staff in three complex educational provisions (a special needs setting and two alternative provisions) facilitated by two Educational Psychologists (EPs) using Action Research. The objective was to give the group members tools to understand and develop their own emotional wellbeing and resilience. Four themes emerged from data analysis: ‘Group readiness’ – how the structure of a WDG was initially hard to follow; ‘Being heard’ – wanting to be listened to within the school; ‘Physical space’ – how the schools were physically positioned and located, and ‘Staff wellbeing’ – how the staff were able to consider their own needs. In each group, the facilitators used an ‘adapted WDG model’ to support the group members. This way of working was recognised by participants as a helpful way to come together and share ideas and reflect on practice. This suggests that the findings could have implications for staff wellbeing across complex educational settings.

Keywords: Educational psychology, work discussion groups, action research, systemic theory, psychoanalytic theory, staff wellbeing, complex educational provisions

Introduction

Difficulties with staff retention within teaching have reached a concerning level across the United Kingdom (Lightfoot, 2016; Harris, 2016; Department for Education 2016 and 2017-18) and coincide with increased demand for school staff to both drive up educational standards and support the emotional wellbeing of pupils (Weare, 2010). Research has long shown the adverse effects that caring for others can have on one’s own wellbeing and the importance of psychological support in such work (Adams, Boscarino and Figley, 2006; Hawkins and Shohet, 2012).

This paper presents an exploratory study carried out by the authors – two Educational Psychologists (EPs) – to improve support for school staff through

the use of work discussion groups (WDGs) to strengthen emotional wellbeing (EWB). EWB is a component of overall health and wellbeing. For the purposes of this study the term refers to feeling good and functioning well and includes an individual's subjective experience of their life and a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values (Office of National Statistics, 2013).

WDGs are not new but their use in complex educational settings is only now emerging, which brings new areas for reflection. This paper begins by exploring the concept of WDGs and their theoretical underpinnings. It then outlines the aims of the present study, the methodology and its findings. Implications for the role of EPs, including use of the 'adapted WDG model' are then considered alongside the study's limitations.

Work Discussion Groups

Traditionally prominent in social care and health settings, WDGs are now beginning to be used in educational settings. Emile Jackson has written extensively on the benefits of WDGs in educational settings, citing how the reduction of staff anxieties directly benefited the wellbeing of the pupils and staff (2002; 2005; 2008a; 2008b).

Recent research has encouraged the use of WDGs to support staff wellbeing by allowing staff to manage the demands of their role in a safe and contained space (Partridge, 2012; Ellis, 2018). The idea of a contained space links to Bion's concept of containment which is integral to the way a WDG is facilitated:

Containment is thought to occur when one person receives and understands the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed by it, processes it and then communicates understanding and recognition back to the other person. This process can restore the capacity to think in the other person (Douglas, 2007: 33).

WDGs have a long history linked with the Tavistock Clinic and Institute (an NHS provider of therapeutic support and training) and are described as "a systemic discussion of experience of work with small and stable groups of professional workers" (Rustin and Bradley, 2008, p.4). The model of WDGs used at the Tavistock, and by those trained there, centres on the idea of the reflective team (Rustin and Bradley, 2008). In this format, a member of the group (the consultee) can choose to put forward a topic for discussion from their workload. The consultee will then consult with a facilitator (in role as a consultant) for 15 minutes about the topic, as the rest of the group listens. The consultee is then asked to turn away from the group to hear their discussion about the consultation. This might mean physically turning their chair away from the group (this part also allows 15 minutes). The remaining participants then talk about their emotional responses and reflections to what they have heard (Andersen, 1987). The idea of 'gossiping in the presence of', enables the

consultee to be open to the discussion and really hear what is being said rather than immediately responding (Burnham, 1986). The facilitator/consultant and the consultee will come back together to discuss what resonated from the group discussion (10 minutes). The whole group then think together to contemplate possible next steps for the consultee to try, or continue to sit and reflect on the uncertainties they have thought about (10 minutes). During the final five minutes, the group reflect on the process.

The method described above which was the initial premise of this research was one among a number of possible models (also described in detail in Bartle and Trevis, 2015). Other approaches include:

- The pioneering work of Gerda Hanko which has encouraged important case discussions between EPs and teachers through ‘solution-focussed approaches’. This is based on a focus on solutions, exceptions and ways forward (Hanko, 1999).
- The ‘Circle of Adults’ approach which can also generate reflective problem-solving behaviours in staff and can lead to important systemic change (Newton, 1995).
- ‘Solution Circles’, which are short and powerful interventions that focus on finding solutions through group and community support networks to encourage effective collaborative working (Forest and Pearpoint, 1996).

Whichever method is chosen, research has shown positive feedback from participants. For example, in Emile Jackson’s studies on WDGs he found that “overall, teachers report that WDGs enable them to become ‘much more aware’ of the needs of their pupils, remain ‘calmer with provocative students’ and ‘much more positive about their work’” (Jackson, 2008a: 71). The authors of the present study concluded that one advantage of WDGs is that they offer a reflective space for staff working in potentially stressful settings. As Hulusi and Maggs argue:

Work Discussion Groups (WDGs) are markedly different from other teacher support groups. The focus of the consultants’ work in WDGs is to facilitate the group’s reflection on the psychodynamic aspects of the group process rather than solely the search for a solution (Hulusi and Maggs, 2015 p.32).

The core theoretical underpinning of the WDG is the recognition of the power of emotional dynamics on a person’s capacity to do the work (Rustin and Bradley, 2008). Klauber describes the work discussion model as “the epitome of the application of psychoanalytic ideas” (2008, p.xix). Here, psychoanalytic ideas are a way of thinking about unconscious processes that can be brought into conscious awareness, and so acknowledged by the worker in a meaningful way (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994).

In the present study, Bion’s (1961) model was used to consider group functioning. Bion talked about the two ways in which groups function; work group

mentality and basic assumption mentality. These states of functioning are fluid and group members can and will move between them during the course of a session.

Within the work group mentality, the primary ‘task’ (the key purpose and aim) of the group can be attended to. For example, in the current study the intended primary ‘task’ was for each member of the group to bring an issue for discussion (i.e. a pupil causing concern, relationships within the classroom or relationships with other staff). They would then be encouraged, via the facilitators, to outline how they saw their role, and what frustrations they were experiencing in this role. In the work group mentality, group members can stay focussed on the ‘task’.

When group members have been overcome by emotional responses, Bion suggests that the group is then functioning in a basic assumption mentality – and as such they are unable to focus on the ‘task’. In the basic assumption mode, the outcome is stagnation and an impossibility in engaging with the task.

The mentality of the group thus impacts the ability of members to engage with the purpose of the task that they have come together to attend to. The aim of a WDG is therefore to foster a work group mentality so that the members can engage with each other and get the best from the group. This means that they are able to listen to each other and reflect on what is being discussed.

Methodology

Setting up the work

The work described in this paper was funded by a small charity which supports parents/carers and staff working with vulnerable children and young people. After the initial proposal was agreed by the charity, the facilitators emailed headteachers of three settings known to them and then followed up with a phone call and a meeting.

Settings and participants

Details of the three settings and the participants are summarised below:

- Setting A was a special school for pupils aged 2-19 with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. Pupils may have had autism, neurological or sensory impairments or complex health needs. There were two separate buildings. The key contact was the headteacher, and group participants were higher-level teaching assistants (seven female, two male).
- Setting B was an alternative provision supporting children and young people aged 5 to 18, split over four sites. The key contact was the deputy headteacher, and participants were a mix of three teachers (in school and outreach) and two teaching assistants (including one with lead on safeguarding) (all female).

- Setting C was an alternative provision for secondary age pupils offering bespoke packages, split across four sites. The key contact was the deputy headteacher, and participants were all teachers who also held a management role (six females and one male).

Structure of the group meetings

The work of Jackson (2008b) provided the practical foundations and boundaries for setting up the groups. For example, the facilitators were clear that each group had to be at the same time and in the same place each week. Membership was closed; this meant that once the group had started no new members could join. At the first session, the facilitators discussed expectations and ground rules; confidentiality; and the working method (i.e. the traditional WDG format outlined in the introduction). Each group attended a weekly session of one hour for nine weeks (except school holidays).

Accountability and confidentiality

The research was initially contracted through headteachers. During contracting it was agreed that what was discussed in the groups would be regarded as confidential, although the facilitators agreed to encourage group members to provide feedback of key themes to be shared with the headteacher.

The other key stakeholder was the charity funding the work who were also presented with written feedback of the numbers of participants, the types of settings the groups took place in and learning from the groups (i.e. what worked and did not work, what key themes arose and any verbal feedback from participants). This was also discussed with group members.

Research paradigm, data gathering and analysis

A researcher's view of reality forms their ontological assumptions which in turn inform their epistemological position (Gardner and Coombs, 2010). The authors of this paper adopted a pragmatic approach. This has a long philosophical history which aims to be flexible and avoid rigid positions within the epistemological debate (Teddlie and Tashkkori, 2003).

From this position, a qualitative and interpretative approach developed, based on a collaborative and participative style that involved the two facilitators working together through communication, planning, facilitation and their joint supervision sessions with a senior psychologist.

The methodology was based on the principles of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). According to Reason and Bradbury (2001), a primary purpose of action research is:

"...to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through

this practical knowledge to the increased wellbeing—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001 p.2).

In this study, action research involved thinking and reflecting on what took place in each group meeting, as well as in the facilitators’ supervision, by using a series of stages: identifying the central concerns; imagining improvement; implementing the improvement and evaluating the improvement through the testing of it in the light of responses of the group members (Hine, 2013). This developed from the basic model of self-reflective action research, a process which is often described as cyclical with four interrelated stages – plan, act, observe, reflect (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

The self-reflective action research processes described above are shown in the table below (table 1) indicating the stages followed both when the facilitators were in the actual group session and when they were outside of it. These stages then led to the findings presented in the next section.

Within the group	Outside of the group
At the end of each session, themes that had arisen would be shared back to the group.	Verbatim accounts (Bailey, 2008) and personal diaries of emotional responses recorded by each facilitator.
Discussion within the group of written feedback of the themes.	Discussed together in joint supervision.
Themes drafted into written form and shared with the group in the last session to comment and edit – possible solutions to any dilemmas also included.	Thematic analysis of the themes across the weeks from all three groups (Braun and Clarke, 2006).
At the end of all the sessions the themes were written into a document as ‘feedback’ to the head-teacher.	Analysis collated with existing literature and theory to present in an academic paper.

Table 1: Methodological processes within and outside of the group

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the four themes to emerge through the groups are discussed. These were: group readiness; being heard; physical space, and staff wellbeing. Psychological and systemic frameworks are referenced where appropriate, as is

literature and illustrative examples from the groups.

Group readiness

The most immediate theme in all groups - and one that dominated sessions 1 and 2 - was an initial inability to follow the traditional structure of a WDG. Although the intended structure with the reflective team technique had been successful in the facilitators' previous experience, in this case there was a marked pulling back from group members. It seemed group members were almost 'not ready' to be within a structured WDG, nor able to participate in case presentation. As Mawson describes from a group he facilitated, "I was told that they were unsure they wanted such a painful 'treatment' if it made the pain of their work more acute" (1994, p.69). Listening to the group members it appeared that part of the resistance to the structure linked to high levels of stress and anxiety due to ongoing organisational changes in all the settings (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994).

In settings A (special school) and B (alternative provision) during sessions 1 and 2 both groups functioned predominantly in basic assumption mentality and there was little space for thinking, only reacting (Bion, 1961). The way that a basic assumption mentality manifests, Bion suggests, is through dependency, pairing and fight or flight. 'Fight or flight mode' is when the group focusses on either fighting, or fleeing from a common enemy. They unite against an enemy (such as an individual, group or system).

The group, when in this mode, tended to talk over each other and lacked both coherence and clarity in their comments. Participants seemed to find it very difficult to hear anything that other colleagues had to say.

In contrast, by session 2 the group in setting C (secondary alternative provision) could function more effectively with each other whilst continuing to operate in a 'dependency' position where they believed that they needed the facilitators to enable them to think. 'Dependency' can be seen when the group seeks a leader who they expect to solve all their problems (Bion, 1961).

Through active listening during the group sessions and discussion in supervision, the facilitators noted that the group was finding it difficult to follow the recommended structure of the WDGs. The facilitators therefore formulated another way to respond to the resistance they encountered within the group by using a flexible and collaborative format which enabled the group members to consider an issue as a group, rather than focusing on one member at a time.

The evaluation of this improvement confirmed the potential of adapting the WDG to meet the needs of the group at the start of the process. The facilitators felt that there needed to be a space for 'group readiness' before following the recommended structure of a WDG. This is referred to within this paper as the 'adapted WDG model'. Within this model the group was able to discuss a topic collectively and not as individuals. Within this adapted model there was no dedicated group reflection phase. Instead the facilitators worked hard to ensure any group reflections that were verbalised after individual comments were also noted and utilised as appropriate.

Being heard

Following implementation of the 'adapted WDG model', all three groups were keen to discuss communication problems and the difficulties they had in being heard in their settings. This theme surfaced most strongly during sessions 3 to 5 but was also present in the remainder of the meetings.

In setting B (alternative provision) one of the workers told the group about a pupil who did not want to do a certain lesson and was then placed in that lesson for double the time and for longer than her peers. The pupil had not felt heard and had subsequently caused the teacher difficulties. 'Being heard' also applied when the group tried to communicate within the school settings.

In setting A (the special school) when lines of communication were improved and the members initiated a newsletter after group session 4, it was only considered meaningful when the participants really felt heard. In this instance, the group in session 5 described how 'pointless' it had been even trying to communicate, sensing that the whole system was almost 'against them' as no action had been taken in line with their suggestions. Through reflection the facilitators came to the same conclusions as Mawson:

"It was at this point that I was able to make sense of my own feelings and the way I have been made to feel by the group. I could then put into words the team's deep sense that they and their work were under attack. . . this may have been the only way they were able to let me know" (Mawson, 1994, p.71).

Through appreciation of this dynamic, and drawing on the action research model, the facilitators could feed back in the group sessions how effectively the groups had in fact communicated their feelings to the facilitators. The facilitators at this stage were aware of the importance of highlighting what others might say if they were in the group through questions or thoughts such as "I wonder how the parents might have experienced that". This provided a way to encourage the group to think of the pressures that might also be faced by the senior leadership team in the school, other staff members, parents, children and young people.

The facilitators also reflected on the potential conflicts arising with the group of the members colluding together, in an effort to berate the headteacher or other senior members of the school. In this situation, the role of the facilitators was to try and retain their own curiosity and neutrality and be mindful that they did not collude with the staff in an 'attack' on the headteacher. This neutrality helps psychologists to keep an overview of the functioning of the system without becoming a part of it (Beaver, 1996).

Physical space

A third theme that arose in all three groups and mainly during sessions 5 to 7 was that of physical space. This was in terms of constrictions in physical space, scarcity of physical space and a lack of mental and emotional space for reflecting

on the challenges of the work.

In setting B (the alternative provision), participants talked about no space being 'safe' – pupils were able to access any area that the staff used which meant that they were unable to have any time in the day when pupils were not there (not even a staffroom). The facilitators experienced this on two occasions when they arrived at setting B; once they were told that the group was to be moved, and on another occasion were told there was 'no room' available at all. The message from the setting's leadership team was that it was hard to prioritise the group and look after the staff. The theme of space also presented in the physical layout of the three settings, which all had split sites. This meant that members of the groups did not have frequent times when they could be together and 'off load'. During the latter sessions, members updated each other on things that they had experienced on one site and not on another (particularly in the groups for setting B and C perhaps due to a larger geographical space between sites). The discussion on the split between the physical localities represented a feeling of being split within the group. Did one person know something that another did not? Were things better on another site?

During supervision, and from their own personal journals, the facilitators found that the implications of not feeling contained through physical space had implications for the psychological wellbeing and functioning of the group. As discussed earlier in this paper, when the group was operating within the basic assumption mentality, the primary task of the group (reflecting on role) was avoided. At this time, defence mechanisms can operate as a way of protecting individuals from feelings that are hard to process. One common defence mechanism is that of 'splitting'. The theory originated with Freud and was further developed by Klein in her work with infants. Klein described a position where the child has experiences which are felt to be entirely good or entirely bad, without the capacity to see what might be in between. Klein argues this is a necessary and healthy part of development for infants, and a state that can be returned to throughout life when an individual has emotions that are hard to process (Klein, 1946).

For the groups in this paper this was displayed at times by the group uniting to see certain people either as 'all good' or as 'all bad'; this shifted from the facilitators to the senior leadership team (or members of it) within the school, or to the pupils. In this way, the group were united against the 'common enemy' of either the facilitators within the group or staff outside of the group. When people feel most threatened, they might consciously or unconsciously split their thinking between 'us' and 'them' in order to feel safe again. All three groups appeared to use this defence mechanism to protect themselves perhaps from how vulnerable/anxious they felt and/or how vulnerable/anxious the children and young people were in their care (Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Mawson, 1994).

In setting A (the special school), the overall feeling from the group was summarised during session 5 as: 'if the headteacher was different, everything would be fine; there would be no problems at all.' The following week, in session 6, the facilitators were seen as bad: 'if there was no group, people would not feel sad and stressed anymore'. In session 7 the group itself had the sense of

being ‘all good’ and everything outside of the group was ‘all bad’. By sessions 8 and 9 the eventual consistent provision of time and a safe physical space and the freedom to share as they wanted to in the adapted WDG model seemed to provide a containing function for all three groups. There appeared to be more of a feeling of safety for them to share their feelings, and begin to think about the thoughts of others both within and beyond the group.

Staff wellbeing

Psychological distress has been associated with a wide range of stressors affecting helping professionals, both in relation to their role and the wider organisational context (e.g. Coyle, Edwards, Hannigan, Fothergill and Burnard, 2005; Jennings 2008). Burnout has been described as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity” (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1996, p.4).

Many examples of stressors were highlighted by all three of the groups during the course of sessions 4 to 9 in relation to their role and the wider system in which they worked. These were sometimes personal, and often to do with over-work and managing unrealistic expectations. These preoccupations appeared to outweigh those relating to working directly with children, and they left staff feeling anxious and vulnerable. A feeling of exhaustion featured, with no capacity left to look after themselves.

Participants talked about finding a way through the sessions to share practice and how they were feeling in their jobs. One common observation that was shared with the facilitators was that it was good to feel they had really been kept in mind. They liked the fact that the facilitators had remembered discussions and themes from previous weeks and had linked those throughout conversations. There was a sense from some members that they felt they could think of alternative ways of working in the system, that they had been given a chance to ponder possible ways forward.

Reflections and Implications for EP Practice

The adapted WDG model

None of the groups that took part in the research were able to follow the conventional WDG model. The authors have used the traditional model many times and have seen how beneficial it can be to participants. However, for newly formed groups working in organisations with high levels of stress, the authors advocate consideration of the use of an adapted model.

Within this adapted model, the group can feel free to discuss a topic jointly, for example, by choosing to talk about communication and share their experiences with each other. Additionally, within an adapted model, the facilitators

can use opportunities to ask questions to open up curiosity and reflect on what they are hearing whilst not focusing on one specific person.

Traditional work discussion group model	Adapted work discussion group model
Check in from previous session and reminder of the group agreement of confidentiality and respect (5 minutes).	Check in from previous session and reminder of the group agreement of confidentiality and respect (5 minutes).
Member of the group (consultee) brings a topic to discuss in consultation with a facilitator/consultant (15 minutes).	Reminder of the traditional format and invitation for a member to bring a topic. Group discussion starts on a topic with no focussed consultee (10 minutes).
Consultee away from the group and the remaining member discuss their emotional responses to the consultation (15 minutes).	Facilitators to seek opportunities for curious questioning and reflection from individuals and the whole group (15 minutes).
Further consultation to explore what resonated for the consultee (10 minutes).	Facilitators focus discussions onto the emotional factors of the topic, away from possible next steps and ‘solutions’ (10 minutes).
Whole group discussion on next steps or continue discussion (10 minutes).	Think together about what possible ways forward there may be (10 minutes).
Reflection on the process (5 minutes)	Reflection on the process and reminder that one person can bring a topic the following week (5-10 minutes).

Table 2: Similarities and differences between traditional and adapted work discussion group models

Feedback from the participants of the groups suggests that some key benefits of the adapted WDG model of group supervision in complex educational settings include:

- a shared understanding of difficulties so that the group can come together to discuss their thoughts as a group rather than an individual bringing their topic to the group.
- a sense of ‘normality’ in relation to key challenges. By working as a whole group, the individuals can feel less alone with factors that are impacting many people across the staff group.

- peer support through allowing the group space to learn to trust and listen to each other.
- facilitation of alternative thinking from an external professional. There was a feeling of support from the group of having an ‘outsider’ help their thinking.

The authors recognise that these benefits can also be found in other staff support models. However, the unique benefit of WDGs (adapted or traditional) is the focus on reflective thinking drawing on systemic and psychoanalytic concepts.

This ability to reflect on what might be happening within the group and how it links to individual participants and the wider system can have positive outcomes for reflective practice and individual and whole school wellbeing.

The benefits cited by Jackson in his more evaluative research on WDGs (Jackson, 2008b) were reflected to the facilitators by participants in all three of the groups discussed in this paper. Participants shared within the sessions that they felt less anxious about situations where they had felt stuck, and more positive about their roles and how to work with others within the school system. The facilitators noticed that as the sessions progressed the members’ presentations appeared calmer and more aware of the needs of the pupils and to wider factors within the school.

The need for supervision of school staff

Whilst supervision is a core element of the work of EPs, there is increasing discussion within education systems about the value of supportive supervision for teaching staff, especially in the context of working with vulnerable children (Hawkins and Shoet, 2012).

In his two-part paper, Weiss illustrates the importance of school staff understanding the impact that their autobiographies can have on the work that they do and their interactions with children (Weiss, 2002a and 2002b). Steel in her paper comments that “it sometimes seems that the adult’s feelings and thoughts are their greatest enemies at work, contributing more to stress than the actual behaviour of the young people with whom they work” (Steel, 2001: 92). As has been highlighted by other commentators in this area (e.g. Steel, 2001; Ellis, 2012; Partridge, 2012) the authors suggest that supervision provides a means of managing rumination, stress and burnout.

Time for group readiness

The facilitators felt that all three of the groups needed to have space to get to know each other in this new way of working and develop as a group. The adapted WDG model might enable this ‘coming together’ as a group in a way that may feel safer than the conventional WDG structure. Allowing time for the group to form is a key implication for EPs and other professionals running support groups for staff in complex educational settings. Once the members

felt a sense of group identity then the conventional WDG model could be more helpful.

Whole school work

At the end of the sessions the groups were invited to give and discuss feedback both to the workplace settings and to the facilitators. In all the groups, the facilitators drafted proposed feedback of the key themes which were then discussed and sent on their behalf to the headteacher and key contact person.

Whilst recognising the difficulties of sustainable organisational change through such groups, the facilitators did see an impact in terms of group members' ability to organise themselves with a more positive approach to discussing concerns. The facilitators arranged follow-up sessions three months later to 'check in' with each of the groups. Although any changes for the participants were not formally evaluated or identified it confirmed that the changes noted had been maintained amongst group members.

However, in all three settings the lead contact in each setting could not commit to further conversations regarding the groups themselves, including feedback from the group about possible next steps that might benefit them. This experience replicates that described by Mawson: "I was doubtful about whether the lessons learned would be generalised and applied elsewhere. Perhaps it was only in that particular setting that professional defences could be lowered and such painful experiences explored" (1994, p.73).

The facilitators' experience of setting up the groups and follow-up during the current study suggests that, in addition to the group sessions themselves, working closely with a member of the senior leadership team is an important factor in improving the sustainability of the outcomes.

This key person in the senior leadership team is likely to need well-defined explanations about supervision and group support – particularly as both can be novel concepts for many staff in complex and mainstream settings. A clear organisational structure of support for staff is a key area that could be tackled by EPs, given their knowledge of the psychological processes that are prominent in group settings. As Obholzer and Zagier Roberts say, "Institutional dilemmas, like personal ones, are anxiety-provoking, and regularly give rise to . . . defensive projective processes" (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994, p.133).

Further research and policy opportunities for EPs

The authors have presented a possible opportunity for the work of EPs, and raised the potential value of WDGs to offer support and reflective time for those working with vulnerable children and young people in complex settings. Such support has the potential to help staff feel valued and supported within their role, which in turn may have policy implications for retention of staff in schools. The sense that staff felt valued came from verbal feedback from participants throughout the groups. Individuals commented that they enjoyed having someone really listen to them, to have a space to think and reflect,

and that someone was interested in what was happening in their settings. The facilitators interpreted this as feeling valued. There is scope for this work to be extended to other settings with a more formal pre and post-evaluation processes, plus follow-up sessions to explore any lasting change in reflective practice.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge clear limitations of this small scale study. It is noted that the authors of this paper were also the facilitators of the groups, so it could be argued that they have less distance to reflect on their effectiveness and impact.

However, there is also an advantage to participating within the sessions and it was not the purpose of this paper to offer an 'objective' overview of a WDG. With this dual role (facilitators and researchers) there was an awareness of the implications of experimenter bias and/or social desirability on the part of the participants and the impact this could have on the analysis (Gardner and Coombs, 2010).

It is also a limitation of this study that more formal evaluative feedback was not sought from the participants and presented here. The views of group members' experiences were sought at the end of each session, and were noted by the facilitators for use in supervision and during analysis. Regrettably, full interviews to explore participants' experiences of the group sessions were not possible due to time pressures on school staff.

Conclusions

The facilitators, through the group, aimed to support and empower those working with children/young people with complex needs, and to give the staff the tools to understand and develop their own emotional wellbeing in challenging situations. This study illustrated that group work has the potential to engage with staff within complex educational settings. In these settings, where staff work with particularly vulnerable children and young people, they need time and space to reflect about the work and its emotional impact. The authors suggest that EPs have the necessary training to do this facilitative work, such as psychological theory pertaining to teaching and learning, consultation skills, and an ability to understand and work with group dynamics.

Comments from participants illustrated the value that they placed on feeling heard and supported. In order to make sustainable proactive change for the future for children and young people there needs to be investment in those who teach and support them, and WDGs (and adapted WDGs) could perhaps enable a reflective space to do this when the level of stress and anxiety "makes thinking impossible" (Bion, 1978, p.45).

A further aim of looking at the use of WDGs in such settings highlights the

possible complexities of facilitating these types of groups and the importance of being receptive and flexible to the needs of the group members and to the specifics of each setting. The structure of WDGs offers a form of ‘containment’, recognition of roles and an opportunity to develop group cohesion. The authors found that the settings in this study needed more time to prepare to be a ‘functioning/functional’ group and the adapted model was able to meet these needs alongside remaining faithful to the underlying principles of the WDG.

A safe and contained space with facilitators who are able to be flexible to the challenges and opportunities arising in the group could have benefits for the participants, the children and young people in their care, and the wider setting and systems in which they work.

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Correspondence

Dr Gemma Ellis
gellis@tavi-port.ac.uk

Dr Victoria Wolfe
vrwolfe@hotmail.com