The Australian Educational Researcher
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00455-7

Educator perspectives on teaching students from traumatic backgrounds and the potential for reflective circles

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Received: 8 April 2020 / Accepted: 11 May 2021

Abstract
Educators are involved in complex, interpersonal and emotionally demanding work on a daily basis. In many schools this includes working with students with extreme and challenging behaviours, many of whom come from traumatic backgrounds. This work requires educators to have high levels of self-awareness, emotional understanding, empathy and calm. Despite this, limited attention has been paid to processes which might support the educator in the development and strengthening of these interpersonal aspects of their work. We report on the results from initial interviews with teachers and principals in three low SES schools in regional Victoria and introduce a model of critical reflection (Reflective Circles) adapted for an education context. Findings highlight the challenges educators currently experience and their reasons for participating in Reflective Circles.

Keywords Education · Trauma · Critical reflection

Introduction

The impact of abuse and neglect in early childhood disrupts normal brain development and has profound social and emotional consequences for the developing child (Cook, 2005). While research into trauma informed pedagogies is a nascent field, there are decades of research from the fields of neuroscience and psychology, citing a positive student- teacher relationship as critical in providing the sense of safety and trust traumatised students need in order to learn (Bath, 2015; Kinniburgh et al., 2005; O'Neill et al., 2010). Remaining calm when dealing with student aggression and class disruption is essential in order to co-regulate a traumatised child who is in a state of fight or flight. Trauma informed teaching practice therefore charges teachers with being emotionally present, extending warmth, acceptance and empathy despite the frustration they experience when a student is oppositional to instruction,

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Published online: 09 June 2021

in constant conflict with their peers, and behaving in ways that violate their value systems (Southall, 2019). This difficult and emotionally demanding work can lead to teacher exhaustion (Jennings, 2011).

While teachers clearly care about all their students, the underlying beliefs, past experiences, and personal values informing their responses are often in tension with the way they are required to respond, or with the culture of the school in which they are working. This tension can create internal conflicts that ultimately lead to teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). In order to acknowledge the interpersonal nature of the educators' work and support teachers in being more effective managers of their complex relationships (Southall, 2020), a form of critical reflection that explores educator experiences on the personal as well as professional level was sought. While critically reflective processes have been shown to improve practices in allied health fields (Gardner, 2014), they are yet to be trialled in education settings such as low socio-economic schools where there are also high levels of challenging student behaviour and students from traumatic backgrounds.

Critical reflection deconstructs assumptions and values that unconsciously contribute to the social and emotional climate in schools and holds potential to change them (Gardner, 2014). To avoid being swept into the vortex of a student's emotional reactions, teachers need an awareness of their own emotional responses and that requires the opportunity to reflect on their own behaviour and both articulate and challenge their underlying beliefs and values (Southall, 2020). Reflective Circles, a form of critical reflection, are predicated on the idea that teachers' beliefs and assumptions about themselves and their students are enacted in their practice. Reflective Circles provides a structured group process for teachers to explore their experiences and broaden their perspectives. Principals and teachers working in three schools with high numbers of students exhibiting challenging behaviours associated with early traumatisation expressed an interest in trialling the reflective circle model in their schools. This paper reports on the initial interviews with staff about their current experiences and their reasons for participation.

Literature review

An interpersonal perspective on teaching describes teaching in terms of the relationship between teachers, students and the broader school community. School and classroom groups as ongoing systems, require a certain stability for their continued existence and positive influence (Hanko, 2016). The ability of teachers to maintain this stability is dependent upon their own social and emotional capacities (Jennings et al., 2014; Poulou, 2007), creating the foundation for students to subsequently learn to manage their own emotions and develop the necessary executive functions to learn (Hodas, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teaching necessarily involves high levels of emotional understanding "because it is an emotional practice which involves relationships with others and which seeks to shape those relationships in particular ways" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 838). Pianta and his colleagues' (Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Walsh, 2014; Pianta et al., 1997, 2007) extensive studies on classroom dynamics regard the emotional aspects of

student–teacher interactions and each child's specific life circumstances as critical in the learning process. Hughes et al., (2008) affirm this claim and conclude that high-quality emotional and instructional interactions are the channel through which educational and social competencies are conveyed to children (Hamre et al., 2014; Howes, 2000; Pianta et al., 2007).

Many studies report that when teachers lack the resources to effectively manage the social and emotional challenges within the classroom, there is an increase in troublesome student behaviours (Durlak et al., 2011; Hemphill et al., 2006). Having to deal with their own negative feelings about behaviour disruption and the need to be seen as 'in control', teachers often respond, not with their trained 'professional self ', "but with their 'personal kneejerk' self which may add their own anger to the child's" (Hanko, 2016, p. 7). The resulting deteriorating climate is marked by increases in troublesome student behaviours and teachers become emotionally exhausted as they try to manage them. Exhausted teachers and the learning environments they generate can have harmful effects on their students, especially those with challenging behaviours (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

It seems the decisions teachers make about their classroom practices are directly influenced by their sense of efficacy for teaching. Goddard et al., (2004, p. 5) observed: the "higher teachers' sense of efficacy, the more likely they are to tenaciously overcome obstacles and persist in the face of failure. Such resiliency, in turn, tends to foster innovative teaching and student learning". Rubie-Davies et al. (2012) contend teachers' efficacy beliefs predicted both student engagement and classroom management. Teachers' beliefs and assumptions about themselves and their students are communicated in the student–teacher interaction (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Walsh, 2014).

As deep levels of empathic understanding are required to support the emotional growth of children and maximise their learning opportunities (Diamond, 2015), understanding the beliefs and assumptions influencing teachers' interpersonal behaviour becomes fundamental to their professional growth. Critical reflection, deconstructing assumptions and values that subconsciously contribute to the social and emotional climate in schools, can create the potential for new understandings and more positive interactions to emerge (Gardner, 2014). Shapiro and Reiff (1993, p. 1379) contend, "the process of reflective inquiry on practice … can lead professionals to seminal insights into their practices and ultimately to improvements in those practices.

Critical reflection in education

Critical reflection or reflective practice is increasingly seen as an integral part of professional training and practice in a number of disciplines (Oelofsen, 2012; Rolfe et al., 2011) such as social work (Gardner, 2019), physiotherapy (Delany & Watkin, 2013), chaplaincy, and pastoral care (Fitchett & Nolan, 2015). As Fook et al. (2016) concluded:

> There is a mounting body of well-researched claims about the benefits and outcomes of critical reflection … There are contributions to 'human flourishing':

> learners experience empowerment, increased competence and confidence. The capacity to deal with uncertainty, manage emotional turmoil and stress, work better in teams with colleagues, integrate theory and practice and plan actions that presumably flow on to clients, patients and service users, through improved overall practice. (Fook et al., 2016, p. 99)

While there are some differences in definitions, typically, critical reflection involves exploring in more depth a specific experience the person has found frustrating, puzzling or confusing in some way. The expectation is to seek greater awareness of their own reactions, feelings and thoughts and what has influenced these (Gardner, 2014). Through critical reflection, assumptions are challenged so that "people tend to shift in their perceptions of the situation. They become more open and reflective as well as looking at the situation a little more critically rather than reactively" (Gardner, 2020).

Similarly, research into critical reflection in allied health supervision found "you feel better about yourself in a way because sometimes you internalise or personalise the issues and you realise that they are universal" (Gardner & Taalman, 2013, p. 96). Their critically reflective discussions encouraged a shared sense of power and capacity to engage with and build relationships and led to resolving conflict in their practice and across the organisation.

Reflective circles

Drawing on Gardner's (2014) two stage model, Southall (2019) adapted a form of group critical reflection—Reflective Circles—for teachers working in a regional specialist setting with a cohort of students who they identified as traumatised. The Reflective Circle process firstly deconstructed an experience exploring the feelings and assumptions associated with it, calling for alternate perspective from others in the group. The other viewpoints inform the next phase in the process, the reconstruction, which challenges the meaning the teacher has constructed about their experience as the only way of viewing it. Through the process of critical reflection, the articulated meanings are examined and either affirmed and used more actively or modified and changed and new ways of responding trialled. In this way "the repertoire of responses and capacity of teachers to deliver effective learning programs for their students were broadened, insights into their relationships with their student gained, and new pedagogies which would more effectively respond to their children's needs, were developed" (Southall, 2019, p. 83).

The group form of critical reflection informing Reflective Circles involves working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems and, as Edwards-Groves, et al. 2010 assert, to enhance professional practice and personal growth. Edwards (2005, 2009) contends the capacity for working with other professionals in this way also strengthens confidence. Rather than simply rationalising existing behaviour, Reflective Circles generate renewed energy and allow educators to trial new ways of responding (Southall, 2019). This is due in part to what Gardner (2014, p. 36) terms the "non-judgemental culture of acceptance" that acknowledges

the experience as shared but still challenges these experiences as ones from which they can learn.

When working with students with challenging behaviour, the need to remain emotionally neutral when feeling strong negative emotion was identified as one of the key challenges teachers experienced (Southall, 2019). Through the process of analysing their experience in Reflective Circles, teachers were able to manage these emotions "making conscious" (Gardner, 2014, p. 36) the source of their feeling. Rather than anger or frustration driving behaviour, a more conscious decision informed by the group, and immersed in a deep understanding of the student, increased their "capacity to manage intense affect" (Kinniburgh et al., 2005, p. 427).

The interpersonal and community experience Reflective Circles brings into focus sets them apart from other teacher reflective practices through improved understanding of the complex emotional and relational dynamics in which educators are involved. Studies of alternative education settings (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Morgan et al., 2013) consistently report this kind of reflection is needed when working with students from traumatised backgrounds. As Diamond (2015) argues:

> This difficult and demanding work requires a reflective culture, created through close collaborative team work, regular reflective group forums… enabling staff to be attuned to the thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and relationships that exist between children and adults across the community. (Diamond, 2015, p. 299)

Context and methodology

Schools in the region were invited to a professional development workshop sponsored by the university called 'Hard Yards, Disruptive Pedagogies for Marginalised Learners', in 2019. The purpose of the workshop was to present current knowledge of the impact of early childhood trauma and build the capacity of educators to develop more trauma informed practices. The Reflective Circles model was introduced as an important element underpinning the approach and an expression of interest for trialling Reflective Circles in schools was sought. School leadership in three of the participating schools expressed interest in a qualitative study to evaluate the influence of Reflective Circles for principals and teaching staff. At each school, all staff members were provided with information about the aims and processes of the study. Twenty teachers and education support staff consented to participate and be interviewed before the Reflective Circles began. Participants comprised female (70%) and male (30%) staff and aged between 23 to 56 years. Participants' backgrounds encompassed a wide range of life experiences, educational backgrounds, and classroom experience (1–16 years), although most had fewer than five years' experience. Teaching staff included classroom teachers, specialist teachers who visit classes for art or music, for example, and education support staff (ESS).

Prior to the introduction of Reflective Circles, interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions with staff in Term 1 of 2019. A range of questions to identify their current challenges and their aspirations for participation in Reflective

Circles were asked. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data were explored through thematic analysis using deductive coding. As analysis progressed, key themes were identified, which were refined through constant comparison with interview transcripts (Creswell, 2012).

The three schools, two primary and one specialist school, (school names used in this paper are pseudonyms) are situated in low socio-economic areas of a regional Australian city and categorised as socio-educationally disadvantaged (Australian Curriculum & Reporting Authority, 2019). The two primary schools educate students from Prep (Australian students first year of school) to Year 6, and in 2019, each school enrolled just under 150 students. Eriostemon School enrols Indigenous students (11%) and students with language backgrounds other than English (7%) and the population comprises one third more girls than boys. Stringybark School's gender balanced population comprises a large Indigenous cohort (29%) and students with language backgrounds other than English (11%). The specialist school, Kalistemon School, educates students from Prep to Year 10 and in 2019 enrolled almost 250 students comprising a 2:1 ratio of male to female students. Kalistemon also enrols Indigenous students (11%) and students with language backgrounds other than English (5%). To preserve the anonymity of teaching staff's comments, specific teaching staff are denoted via the term T1, where 1 refers to the staff member first mentioned in the paper.

Results

In most primary schools, the regular classroom is relatively predictable with routines that guide each day, however, even with those routines in place, in the study schools, student behaviours can render classrooms far less predictable, ensuring teachers' need to expect the unexpected, because "every day is different" (T1) There were two main emerging themes from the interviews: personal challenges, primarily related to building relationships and managing classroom dynamics and systemic contextual challenges related to how such relationship building was influenced by the school, school system, and from other contextual constraints.

Personal challenges in building relationships and managing the classroom dynamics

First, simply understanding students and their related behaviours was a significant challenge to building relationships and often time consuming. Teaching staff described classrooms with "many tricky kids" (T1) and "unpredictability of student behaviour" (T1); with incidents of challenging behaviour varying from once to twenty times a day. Despite teachers' best efforts to build trust, they recognised that some of their students were unable to trust easily or quickly. One staff member explained that you "can only guess what is happening for a student at any particular time" (T2), indicating the difficulties in avoiding triggering a student's challenging behaviour.

When students display challenging classroom behaviours, they invariably disrupt other students' learning and garner a great deal of the teacher's attention and time, which in turn, diminishes the support available for other students in their learning. Teachers describe the challenge and frequency of trying to balance those competing student needs. Teachers struggled in "Catching [a student] at the right time" (T3) to intervene and prevent an escalation of behaviour that would affect the learning of the whole class. One teacher commented:

> I get, like anxious within myself because, I suppose they're being disruptive for the [other] kids and then I'm getting frustrated cos these kids are looking at the students over there, and then they're not learning, and then my teaching's gone out the window. (T4)

If an opportunity to intervene was missed, an escalation of student behaviours invariably ensued. Skill and compassion were identified as critical in seeking to build relationships generally, but particularly in de-escalating the situation, calming the student/s and re-engaging them in their learning.

Teaching staff were very aware of the safety of other students as a priority and many classroom staff reported being physically hurt and assaulted. If a more disciplinary approach was imposed, students might not "back down because it's weak to back down [and] they don't want to be seen as weak at all" (T5). An ESS who was assaulted recalled: "I didn't know [the student] and his background … [and] it taught me to be aware and to really read when the student needed space" (T6). One staff member said she loss trust in herself to be able to judge a situation and read a students' mood, so as to avoid compromising her safety at school. Believing she had a good student–teacher relationship, she was perplexed when the student assaulted her. She explained "[I had] a little false sense of security that it was never going to happen I have a good relationship with this student" (T7).

All teaching staff were conscious of the need for flexibility and self-awareness, managing the frustrations of planned classes that "go out the window" (T4). They needed to find responsive and flexible ways to manage student behaviour and learning, and the balance between control and support. Teachers recognised the need to be self-aware and to remain calm in challenging circumstances with one commenting that reaching that sense of calm when confronted with escalating classroom behaviour came from accessing her inner strength to remain "really neutral, to be quite gentle and calm" (T3).

For newly graduated teachers, with little classroom experience, the abovementioned challenges were magnified. Many teachers in this study reported they had less than five years' experience and one teacher asserted: "I need support because I don't have the experience" (T8). These early career teachers acknowledged their lack of strategies for relationship building in order to be able to teach particularly challenging and defiant students, especially when they compared themselves with other teachers.

Contextual and systemic challenges/constraints

Teaching staff recognised contextual challenges relating to school and system level expectations in relation to prioritising building relationships. Teachers felt pressured to be teaching the curriculum at the expected levels for their particular grade level, although many students in their class were well below this. A teacher said the mismatch between assumed student capabilities in the Australian curriculum and those of the prep students in his classroom was glaring because almost all students had tested "already two or three years behind where the Department [of Education] expect them to be". He explained:

> There's a few developmental things with sharing and things like that. I spent the first term like, let's sit on the floor without hitting someone else. And especially my classroom, how we make each other safe, because if we are not feeling safe, we are not gonna learn a thing. I can start doing what [the department] need me to do after the first semester. It takes me the first semester to sort of get those tools that the kids need before they can get ready to learn. (T9)

School practice and system expectations were experienced as pressures including the burdensome amount of documentation required in lesson plans and behaviour incidents. Several participants were disappointed that at the end of the year, after a year of building relationships with students, they had to begin again with a new group. Time constraints were often frustrating, when seeking to understand unpredictable behaviour, one teacher said: "I feel curious and I get frustrated because I don't know where to get the answers from and I feel frustrated because there's not enough time to really tease out those answers" (T10). Casual relief teachers and specialist teachers report additional challenges because their teaching circumstance limits opportunities to build relationships with students.

Teachers weren't always able to use their teaching philosophy to build relationships instead of complying with school norms. For one teacher, the school's processes and seating arrangements did not fit his preference for collaborative learning. In another school, the discipline policy was "mak[ing] it harder for all staff to embrace the idea [of trauma informed practice]" (T7) as the focus was on aligning with policy rather than building relationships. Child-safe policies were also identified as unhelpful. Several teachers reported, some of "these kids need a little bit of affection, like a hug or a hand around the shoulder (T11). Some teachers were particularly aware of the dangers of this: "it just makes you think twice about every decision you make like hugging a child or holding their hand" (T12).

Potential impact on staff

The personal challenges for teaching staff who work with students with traumatic backgrounds and challenging behaviours were constant, ongoing, varied and unpredictable. They thought about students and behaviours at random times outside of school time. Sleeplessness was common and many agreed, "you'll wake up in the

night and you'll think about things" (T13). Another teacher doubted his/her career choice: "sometimes I'd go home and I'd think, oh maybe I am just not cut out to be a teacher" (T8). Some teaching staff reported they either felt unsupported by the school or considered the school's efforts of support as inadequate. Isolation and lack of support from peers was identified as a further challenge for some. Most taught alone in classrooms, with no peer mentors to share the everyday challenges and without ESS support. Some were anxious about colleagues' perceptions of their capacity to deal with behaviour issues, although interestingly, only one experienced teacher expressed confidence in being able to manage complex classroom dynamics.

While incident reports, written by teachers after critical incidents to assist in a referral process for students' specialists' support, help students, the teaching staff impacted by incidents felt their needs were less considered. Some had accepted the school's support for serious incidents, but considered it inadequate, as one said: "I probably keep a lot to myself and then I build and build and then I'll have like a breakdown" (T13). Others contemplated using documenting incidents as a way of processing them but feared how these might be used. Staff used time off work as 'mental health' days as a coping strategy.

Aspirations for critical reflection practice

Despite a limited understanding of reflective circle processes, teaching staff perceived a number of potential benefits in Reflective Circles: "being able to reflect on things is important" (T13). They hoped to develop new ways of working and to increase their knowledge and skills through sharing experiences and deeper exploration of how they practise. Due to time constraints in the daily routine of school, staff relished an opportunity to have time dedicated to "thinking more deeply about what is going on in the classroom and really going deeper into it" (T14), expanding their ideas and possible strategies. A typical comment was: "There's things you can always learn from someone else, isn't there? … Like we'll have different knowledge and things like that to bring together, so yeah … I'm excited" (T15).

Involvement in Reflective Circles was considered a way to consciously stimulate ideas and challenge practice because, as one teacher observed: "Sometimes … you kind of just get stuck in your old ways a bit and you keep doing that same thing. It's not necessarily working, but that's what you know" (T11). In her opinion, rather than "just going and venting to someone" (T11), there was strength in setting time aside to deliberately think about practice. Staff also wanted to foster engaging constructively and developing mutual support with peers given limited opportunities for connection in a usual school day. The superficiality of short exchanges between staff limited meaningful collaboration and they aspired to being "part of a big circle of ideas" (T5).

Working collaboratively with colleagues and sharing particular challenges, appealed to staff. At one school, it was also hoped that collaboration would build bridges between what appeared to be 'us and them' attitudes among colleagues. Less experienced teachers were particularly interested in the potential for peer mentoring through Reflective Circles. One teacher remarked, "if you come out [of the

study] with just half a dozen things that you could take on board to help a student, then that's fabulous" (T8).

While all teaching staff were keen to be involved in the study, their confidence to reflect on practice and share experiences varied. As one teacher revealed, " I'm not good at reflecting … so I think it will be an important skill for me to develop, to extend and reflect in different ways too" (T4).

Discussion

The challenges experienced by the teachers in this study provide contemporary insights into the complex personal and interpersonal dynamics taking place in their classrooms daily. Jennings et al. (2014, p. 1) explain that teachers typically experience "emotionally demanding events" when working with challenging students who are not well regulated and they require a range of personal and professional competencies. Teachers clearly sought to build their own emotional understanding and also those of their peers, as Pianta and Walsh (2014) advocated, and tune into the individual and nuanced needs of students in their care. However, they also expressed the desire for more knowledge and capacity to use processes that would enable them to manage these needs more effectively. Teachers recognised that learning more about the implications of trauma and trauma informed practice was helpful as well as the potential value of sharing ideas and processes to foster emotional understanding of themselves and their students.

Participants' desire for dedicated time to deeply reflect on their students, draw from the experience of others, and engender the mutual support of their peers was evident. Without structured time dedicated to understanding their student's individual behavioural responses, patterns, motivations and triggers, teachers felt unable to properly 'read' students and instead relied largely on 'guess work'. Working with dysregulated students requires teachers to tailor their responses to an individual child within their varied contexts (Southall, 2019), so they require a combination of approaches that consider a student's academic, developmental and social and emotional needs (Domitrovich et al., 2017). This deeper understanding of a student was considered a prerequisite for timely interventions that might prevent a lesson from "going out the window" (T4) or result in an escalation of behaviour, endangering themselves or their students. Time allocated for thinking deeply about the purpose and motives behind student behaviour and the contribution of expertise by colleagues were seen to be supportive of this process and were identified as key aspirations for the Reflective Circles.

While teachers clearly recognised the need to be "really neutral, to be quite gentle and quite calm …" (T3) when a student's escalating behaviour became threatening, they acknowledged how difficult it was to metaphorically "cop the punches" (T1); to tolerate abusive or aggressive behaviour from a student. Awareness of their own emotional responses in order to avoid getting caught up in the emotional reactions of a student required high levels of self-awareness and emotional processing for which teachers needed support. Some teaching staff thought they generally had the ability to remain emotionally neutral in the face of a student's emotional dysregulation,

but this was harder for less experienced teachers. Overall, they reported insufficient time with peers in structured discussion to meaningfully explore these reactions and broaden their repertoire of responses.

Teachers' capacity to develop deep understanding of themselves and their students and develop individualised responses were seen to be undermined by the pressures of balancing the competing needs and diversity of learners within their classes. This was particularly true for specialist school classrooms with several behaviourally disordered students. Mainstream school staff experienced tension between expectations to meet predetermined curriculum levels and the imperative to develop students' personal and interpersonal skills in readiness to learn. Similarly, schoolwide disciplinary expectations and decisions were viewed as being in conflict with more 'trauma informed' (Downey, 2007) responses that prioritise the student–teacher relationship and the development of trust over whole school behaviour management policies. Other school policies responding to concerns about touching students also meant opportunities for demonstrating much needed warmth and support for students were being lost.

Issues of policy, coupled with thwarted planning, disrupted learning, and fears for their own and the safety of their students, produced high levels of frustration and anxiety for many. For some staff, there were additional feelings of isolation, being unsupported or judged by others and more generally, being undervalued by the system. Teaching staff reported a range of responses to these feelings, with many describing excessive thinking about their student outside of school and intrusive thoughts about an incident or student behaviour invading other activities, including sleep. These responses to stressors (Maslach et al. 2001) are the precursors to emotional exhaustion and ultimately teacher burnout (Jennings et al. 2014), that in turn, are linked to poorer classroom climates and student negative behaviour escalations (Wolf et al., 2015); the negative spiral referred to by Lewis et al. (2005).

Without sufficient structural support to manage their emotions or develop the self-awareness to control their own reactions, remain calm and not escalate a situation, teaching staff felt they were not being effective enough or sufficiently responsible for the students in their care. This was a strong motivation for their involvement in the Reflective Circles, as they associated the group experience and expertise with increasing their own. This resonates with Edwards (2017) description of relational expertise, which involves expanding the interpretation of a phenomenon by drawing on the strength of different expertise offered by collaborators. This expansion means that more aspects of the phenomenon are recognised and therefore worked on (Edwards, 2017). All teaching staff expressed a desire for this deeper exploration and demonstrated a willingness to engage constructively with alternate views and experiences from their peers. Inexperienced staff were additionally conscious of the need to learn how to build relationships with peers through reflective groups.

The teaching staff's aspiration, and our assertion, is that Reflective Circles that analyse the background to experience, provide an opportunity to identify and express emotions, and involve others with a range of expertise may be a way forward in changing the current experience of teachers, enabling them to feel mutually supported and more effective in their complex, nuanced, and demanding work.

Conclusion

What this research makes explicit is the personal and interpersonal nature and challenge in teaching students with challenging behaviours. Teachers' deep understanding of themselves, as well as their students and the need to build relationships with peers through mutual support were consistent themes among staff in the low socio-economic schools in this study. Teaching staff sought support to be able to continue to work in schools with students with challenging behaviours, particularly those from traumatic backgrounds. The personal impact from ongoing unresolved issues that creep into their thoughts outside school hours is likely to affect teacher efficacy in dealing with the day-to-day pressures of classroom teaching. Since the wellbeing of students is influenced by teachers' social and emotional wellbeing (Warren et al., 2011), a deteriorating classroom climate and student wellbeing become increasingly likely. The danger of not paying attention to these aspects of teachers' work is that the levels of stress experienced will increase, and the current signs of their compromised health and wellbeing will inevitably lead to teacher burnout.

These initial findings reveal teachers' current experiences in socio-educationally disadvantaged schools and highlight the need for an intervention to support them in their ongoing challenges. After an initial introduction, teaching staff perceived high value in trialling critical reflection as a process to support their teaching practice. This research project will follow the implementation of Reflective Circles in these schools. It will investigate the impact of Reflective Circles for teaching staff in processing and managing emotions, understanding the behaviour and motivations of individual students, and whether Reflective Circles provides the much-needed professional support they seek.

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