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Effectively supporting teachers: a peer supervision model using reflective circles

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are faced with an increasingly complex environment in which they need significant support to foster the classroom climates their students benefit from. Developing a critical understanding of the school and broader social context can foster awareness of the 'bigger picture' that influences the school community individually and collectively. This article explores research in three schools in Victoria, Australia that used a reflective circles model to explore challenging classroom and school experiences. Separate groups of 4–6 teachers or principals volunteered to participate in the reflective circles with each circle taking about 1–1.5 hours. The initial findings from interviews with nine teacher participants and three principals affirm the value of the circles for generating significant mutual support, awareness of other perspectives and strategies and building confidence and capacity to seek change. What emerged suggests the value of a peer supervision model based on critically reflective practice to support, enable, empower and foster a sense of agency for teachers and principals.

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Introduction

Given the collaborative nature of teaching and learning, and the complexity of classroom dynamics, becoming an effective teacher demands more than curriculum and pedagogical knowledge (Luthar et al., 2000). Teachers are expected to have high levels of social and emotional competenceincluding ability to: then have the quote and end it with (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, p. 496).

> create a warm and nurturing learning environment, be emotionally responsive to students, form supportive and collaborative relationships with sometimes difficult and demanding parents, professionally relate to administrators and colleagues, effectively manage the growing demands imposed by standardized testing, model exemplary emotion regulation, sensitively coach students through conflict situations with peers, and effectively (yet respectfully) handle the challenging behaviors of disruptive students.

Other research affirms that to achieve this teachers need professional development that fosters positive relationships with their students for their mutual wellbeing (Iancu et al., 2018). This requires teachers to recognise and engage with their own emotions and

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reactions at a personal level and to receive ongoing emotional support (Graham et al., 2011). For education to foster socially just world, Brookfield (2017) argues that teachers also need to understand the influence of the social context on their underlying values and assumptions and how these support or hinder positive educational outcomes. Our earlier research (Southall et al., 2021) demonstrated that teachers value understanding their own perspectives, reactions and responses, and the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the underlying assumptions and values that influences them.

Southall's (2019) research shows teachers benefit from using reflective processes to consider personal and professional experiences that influence their reactions in the classroom and modifying their responses/behaviour/reactions/practice to work more effectively with students, including those who have experienced complex trauma. These reflective processes in disciplines such as social work (Beddoe & Maidment, 2015) and psychology (Creaner & Timulak, 2016) are usually named supervision. Supervision is viewed in these disciplines as ensuring quality of practice, and equally provides the key elements of support and education.

Similarly, in schools, the value of supervision in providing reflection to support growth and development for teachers is not new (Zepeda, 2013); however, it is rarely embedded in policy and teacher practice. Various models of supervision, individually or in groups, including peer group supervision can effectively provide for mutual reflection and support.

In this article, we use the findings from three schools where teachers volunteered to participate in two reflective circles each term over a nine-month period to explore the potential of a model for reflective peer supervision. The aim of the research was to explore the influence of using critical reflection on classroom experience, partly related to teachers engaging students who had experienced complex trauma. The more general results have been previously described (Baxter, Southall and Gardner, 2021). What emerged from the data was that teachers articulated the benefits of reflective circles as enabling, empowering, restoring, and generating a sense of agency (individual and collective). This aligned with the previous work of one of the authors in other disciplines. We explore the links between these findings and the value of supervision as a model of mutually supportive peer supervision within school systems given key aspects of supportive or restorative supervision identified in the literature (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Proctor, 2008). On the basis of our research then, we argue here that teachers benefit from a form of peer reflective supervision similar to other professions where strong social and emotional relationships are central to effective practice.

Literature review

The need for supervision

Supervision, with its overtones of unhelpful surveillance, rarely resonates well with teachers. Widely considered an evaluative practice, supervision has been linked to teacher quality, with no guarantee it will positively influence teachers' instructional practice. Mockler (2015, p. 121) noted the current *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework* 'walks something of a knife edge in the dual emphasis on the improvement of "teacher performance" . . . and the importance of "creating a strong and

supportive culture in a school"'. The pervasiveness of a culture of performance in teaching contaminates motives for teacher development and teachers feel judged and vulnerable (Glanz, 2005).

For Sullivan and Glanz (2013) 'super-vision' may be a way that teachers can re-conceive supervision in a non-judgemental way. Similarly, Gardner (2016, p. 99) suggests '"super" vision: the capacity to stand back from a particular issue or experience and see it from a new perspective' which can counter stress in the workforce. O'Donoghue and Tsui (2015, p. 626) found for social work 'a clear theme across several studies that the provision of emotional support by supervisors within a trusting relationship mitigates the effects of work stress and is positively related to job satisfaction'. Teachers do want to develop this reflective capacity (Southall et al., 2021) and see it as generative as well as a way to ensure efficacy.

What we mean here by supervision does include accountability to ensure effective work; however, it is significantly broader. In many disciplines, supervision is identified as providing ongoing support that professionals need in their practice from social work (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012) to nursing (Cutliffe et al., 2010) to psychology (Oelefson, 2012). Beddoe and Davys (2016, p. 15) exploration of supervision research across health and social care found that 'in general, the literature supports the benefits of supervision in assisting practitioners to be retained in the workforce and to assist the maintenance of hopeful, positive practice'. The emphasis is on regular, protected time for reflection that 'aims to enable the supervisee to achieve, sustain and creatively develop high quality practice through the means of focused support and development' (Bond & Holland, 2010, p. 15). Author (2016) suggests there are three aspects of supervision: accountability to ensure quality, supportive or enabling supervision that emphasises reflection, and educational supervision. In nursing, these aspects are termed normative, restorative and formative supervision (Proctor, 2008).

Supervision in education often excludes the supportive or restorative aspect that Kadushin and Harkness (2014, p. 159) describe as the 'people centred, expressive' aspect of supervision 'associated with seeing that the people who do the job are comfortable, satisfied, happy in their work, and enjoy a sense of psychological well-being'. This kind of supervision is essential for disciplines such as social work, psychology, nursing, and allied health which, like teaching, where the ability to make connections at an emotional and social level is key. As Day (2004, p. 105) explains, the enactment of professional practice within education 'involves the head and the heart'.

Supervision underpinned by a critically reflective understanding can foster restorative supervision, generating greater empowerment and agency, including a desire for socially just practice. What we mean by the 'critical' in critical reflection is awareness of how history and social context influence an individual's experience. We often internalise society's attitudes and values, even if we do not consciously agree with them (Brookfield, 2014), which can unhelpfully influence practice. Awareness of social structures and resulting assumptions can help us see how the world could be if we act collectively to see change (Morley, Macfarlane & Ablett, 2014). From a social justice perspective, Noble et al. (2016, pp. 149–150) say 'critical supervision is about creating "big-picture" practitioners, who see and consider the surrounding contexts of their practice, articulate it to others and factor it into their decisions and action'. They continue that 'while big-picture critical practitioners may not always be able to change

or influence contexts, even their ability to understand those contexts can create a greater sense of purpose and achievement'. Similarly, teachers in 'inquiry communities' encouraged to be curious, grappling with critical questions in their classrooms, and debating practice are far more effective in the educative process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). However, in education 'there remains a silence around the need for teachers to engage as active agents of their own professional learning and development' (Mockler, 2015, p. 123).

Traditionally, supervision in education, often referred to as mentoring or coaching (Kemmis, Keikkeinenm, Fransson, Aspfors, & Edwards-Groves, 2014; Spooner-Lane, 2017), was individually focused with a senior staff member. Reflective practice was not seen as supervision, but rather as a way of peers usually informally learning together to share insights and improve practice (Shapiro & Reiff, 1993) or to understand how their emotions and perception might influence reactions (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). (Beijaard et al., 2004) suggest teachers reflect on their roles through participation in dialogue, individual reflection and social communicaton. In Edwards (2005, 2009) work on 'relational agency' she affirms the value of collaborative learning where indivduals can develop their 'capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations' (Edwards, 2005, pp. 169–170).

What we are suggesting here is a more formalised form of peer supervision using critical reflection. Peer and group supervision have emerged more recently in health and welfare professions, with a more democratic model preferred to encourage mutual sharing of experience. In group supervision, a senior worker usually a manager facilitates, whereas in peer supervision, staff mutually supervise others working at the similar levels and focus on the supportive and enabling aspects of supervision. The benefit of peer and group supervision is that participants have access to many different perspectives as well as diverse life experiences (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012).

Peer group supervision encourages mutual learning; understanding the wider connections to practice and developing agency in seeking change individually and collectively. The mutuality of the process and the ability to ask questions that encourage deeper reflection are central to peer supervision. A strength of restorative group supervision is that it is 'normalising . . . an opportunity to understand that others are feeling the same way' (Wallbank, 2013, p. 28) and also that different perspectives can be shared in a way that generates change.

Ideas about supervision in education

The fundamental ideas here are not unfamiliar to education. Zepeda (2013, p. 2) advocates instructional supervision as primarily about promoting growth and development:

> Developing a vision for supervision is a reflective and iterative process. In a culture built on a foundation of collaboration, collegiality, and trust, the supervisor is better able to promote the processes that support and actively engage adults in reflection and inquiry.

While promoting supervision in education, Zepeda (2013, p. 14) warns of the danger that instructional supervision will prevail with a focus on standards of content and curriculum, rather than relationship building so that '[r]eflection, dialogue, inquiry, collegiality,

and collaboration are not embedded in the work needed to refine classroom practices'. As a result, the supervision processes have often been seen as tools of accountability within regimes of audit and performativity (Gerrard & Farrell, 2013). Research related to supervision in teaching is usually related to engaging with and assessing student teachers and Steele (2017), for example, advocates for more collaboratively based models. Supervision seen as compliance where the emphasis may be on efficiencies and effective management of workers negates many potential benefits. In such times, Wilkins et al. (2017) found for social workers, too much focus was placed on 'what and where' and not enough on 'how and why'.

In teacher supervision, providing a space where teachers critically reflect on, make sense of, and re-think their practice, can provide a vehicle for teachers to move towards a greater understanding of the complexity of their practice. Supervision can provide opportunities for teachers to come to 'know their own knowledge' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 45) and 'the epistemological bases of their practice' (Sachs & Mockler, 2012, p. 90), 'form[ing] a foundation for the development of confidence and trust in professional judgment' (Mockler, 2015, p. 125).

Methodology

In this paper, we explore implications for supervision from implementing reflective circles in three schools in regional Victoria, Australia. All three schools are classified as socio-educationally disadvantaged (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020), enrolled students from high poverty areas (Victorian Council of Social Services, 2020), and teachers reported numerous students who had experienced significant trauma. Two are primary schools (Prep to Year 6)—a government school and a Catholic school, and the third school is a government specialist school for students with an intellectual disability.[1] Ethics approval was granted by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number HEC19100).

Teachers and principals in separate groups used Author's (2019) reflective circle adaption of Gardner (2014) model of critical reflection. Essentially, small groups with four to six members to explore a school-based experience that felt significant after completing their own reflection using a structured series of questions. To encourage reflexivity, these questions include asking about their reaction, assumptions made, meaning of the experience and how this was influenced by their own history, social and school context as well as asking them to explore how this experience might be perceived by another person involved. Each participant presented a summary of their reflection, and then each group member responded with a question or comment to encourage deeper reflection and/or other perspectives. The groups identified here each had a facilitator experienced in reflective circles, who could encourage exploring the experience more deeply, including identifying contrasting values and beliefs and the articulating of alternative perspectives, if this was not sufficiently done by participants. Teacher groups at each school, leadership groups either at or across schools participated in reflective circles twice a term, before or after a school day for approximately an hour and a half. All participated in orientation sessions about the use and processes of reflective circles at their schools before they volunteered to

participate to ensure informed consent and written consent was provided by each participant before the research process started. Note that this was not described as supervision at this stage.

Semi-structured interviews from two schools with 12 participants—nine teachers and three principals are analysed here from their experience of participating in at least six reflective circles. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and participants de-identified. We have included our reflections and meeting notes related to all three schools as recommended by Creswell (2012). Interviewers independently analysed the data to identify themes related to supervision, consistent patterns and themes emerged in discussions (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).

Findings

We have discussed elsewhere what teachers and principals saw as the benefits of the reflective circles (Baxter, Southall and Gardner, 2021). This article demonstrates how the outcomes from reflective circles affirm using the process as peer supervision for the supportive or restorative aspect of supervision identified in the literature. We have identified four main categories from analysis of the data: restorative and supportive, enabling, empowering, and creating a sense of agency that are integral to supervision and that teachers valued:

Restoring and supportive: generating mutual support

First, the reflective circles were consistently identified as being supportive and restoring related to the initial process of establishing a culture of safety, agreeing on such issues as confidentiality, respecting the validity of each person's experience and reactions, and the expectation of *mutual* sharing, with everyone taking turns in presenting their experience. Teachers and principals consistently commented on the value of an emotionally safe place to explore experiences. Typically: '*it's been incredibly supportive . . . for those moments where you don't feel safe probably in other places*' (Teacher 1) Mutuality was key: each person being willing to share an experience that they were not completely happy with, but becoming aware that their experiences were often similar. This mutual support meant that participants felt different after the supervision session, frequently commenting that they felt lighter:

> we walk out that door, walking on cloud nine. And it doesn't matter how deep and serious and full on the conversations are, or the topics that we've talked about, you walk out the door feeling like 'pwah' something has lifted off my shoulders, we are not in this alone (Teacher 2).

It was important that participants were from the same level: principals in one group, teachers in another, so that they could speak freely and see that their experiences partly related to having similar roles. For the principals meeting across schools, it was significant to have similar experiences from different school systems. Teacher 3 said ' . . . *that was almost scary really how much the same it is . . . [which] has been terrific and really enlightening' because as Teacher 2 found 'every single time we could have gone, oh yeah, I've got the same story . . . Yeah, that has just been amazing, yeah it has'.*

This also helped participants separate out what they were responsible for and what was outside their sphere of influence, including from agencies external to the schools. As Teacher 2 commented

> And now, I think the fact that other people are dealing with exactly the same stuff, it's not just me, I am not the person making this child's life worse, or whatever else.

Feeling supported also meant it was easier to acknowledge their own uncertainty and confusion and sometimes unhappiness or regret. Teacher 3 commented, although he had previously discussed an issue, it had remained unresolved:

> . . . you know, we spend so much time dealing with spot fires and that you don't get the quality time to sit down and be able to reflect on, you know, gee I did that, but I don't really know why I did that to be honest. Yeah, maybe I wish I hadn't done that and next time I'll do it differently, you know and thank you for just clarifying my own thoughts around what we did or what we could have done.

Mutuality also meant understanding each other better, so being more supportive. Seeing *why* someone might have reacted they meant participants were better able to accept what they had done was reasonable at the time:

> Reflecting, being able to share, learning from others but also listening to others and understanding them better. I think as a colleague, sometimes, yeah it just, you don't always get their perspective on it and you don't always understand why they're doing what they're doing or what they thought about it. (Teacher 5)

The circles meant she could move to, as a colleague suggested, being

> So, comments shifted, where they might bag someone out if they're, you know, not pulling their weight, they seem a bit slack. And you'd say they're really flat at the minute, they've had a lot on (Teacher 4).

Having other people validate feelings and reactions, was also significant: '*it [the validation] just makes me feel a lot more confident and able to share things*' (Teacher 6). '*Just to be able to acknowledge what you actually really feel and not have to hide it*.' (Teacher 1) Validation meant participants were sometimes enabled to see when action was needed:

> [my] colleagues were angry about it as well. So I spent a lot of time trying to validate my own feelings and then think that I'm overreacting, but yeah, to see some of their own reactions like, oh this isn't OK (Teacher 1).

For some participants, this also related to having their feelings situation validated: '*. . . we get overlooked and you sit there with them [reflective circle group], you're like, shit that's really happening in your life right now? Or that's happened to you?' (Teacher 7).*

Enabling: seeing different perspectives and so questioning your own

What we mean by enabling here is seeing other perspectives, so understanding that other strategies were possible from listening to the reaction of others. Having each participant comment or ask a question encouraged participants to see there were other perspectives and to understand their experience differently, seeing that other assumptions could lead to confidence in acting differently:

> it helped me with my confidence and my abilities to do things and being able to try different things in a different way that I probably wouldn't have done last year, because I wouldn't have taken the time to think about or knowing that it was okay to do that or felt like, oh yeah, other people are doing that too.

Simply hearing someone else's story and reaction could made a significant difference. For some this was a new experience:

> I'd actually never think to take other perspectives really. You just had your own, so I think that has been the biggest thing [to change for me]. Understanding their [the student's] perspective and the other students who are impacted and as well as mine and you know whoever else"(Teacher 8).

Enabling fostered understanding more deeply the complex dynamic between the staff member and the student, class, or parent, including what was happening internally. It helped to ask what was influencing your reaction from past experience or preferred ways of doing or being. Teacher 3 would more often ask:

> . . . what am I feeling here or why am I having this reaction to this? So, if you do get frustrated with something or get angry, . . . but you just think, why is this kid getting up my goat or why is that kid making me feel this way.

This was a different way of reflecting, as Teacher 9 commented:

> It opens you up to reflecting in a different way, like not just your usual . . . staffroom end of the day rant sort of thing . . . [and] if you happen to be catching up with someone in your circle, the conversation just sort of naturally takes that other format which is obviously really positive and really beneficial because you're reflecting about it in a more constructive way.

Empowering: identifying and questioning values and beliefs in the context of 'the bigger picture'

Participants sometimes felt empowered by the reflective circles having a greater confidence, energy for their work role and capacity to take control of their reactions and experiences.

When Teacher 1 found that his colleagues shared his anger, he commented, '*You know and I suppose in some ways, like I did feel empowered by that*'. For Teacher 3, a changed sense of energy was part of feeling empowered: *'We always come away just enlivened by the experience'*. This connected to 'stopping' for reflection, being able to stand outside the situation and see it more independently linked with seeing the 'bigger picture'. '*Everyone just brings so much knowledge and so much information and you get a real big wide picture about what, like, things that you don't consider' (Teacher 9).*

'Stepping back' and see things as an outsider, empowered participants to better interpret challenging situations and their own contribution to them.

> Taking that opportunity to see that it's not, or it's just you, or to look at that perspective. So, it's changed the way that I have probably dealt with things, perceived things and perceived others because you're consciously stopping and thinking about it. . . . So, I know that I have dealt with situations differently than I would have, even at the start of the year. And being back in the classroom this term has tested that time and time again (Teacher 5).

Part of feeling empowered was awareness of assumptions and values: '*I like that one [reflective circle question] about what assumptions am I making, to actually have to voice that to other people, even that's reflective and makes you want to think about things slightly differently*' *(Teacher 3*).

Some participants became particularly conscious of the broader context of migration, poverty and gender; others of being from a different generation from current students with different backgrounds.

> I think it allowed me to check some of my values and morals and beliefs in the door in the fact that they are different to the kids. Different generation, different backgrounds, different upbringings, all those things. So, I think it allowed me to actually stop and pay attention to that and just say it's okay . . . It felt a bit less reactive I suppose, because you had thought about it, understood it a bit more (Teacher 5).

Participants named assumptions based on their own backgrounds and assumptions about social issues:

> And so that's why I think, that one about what assumptions am I making here, or what background should I be considering because we, I feel like I lived in a bubble all my life having come here . . . I didn't understand seeing bigger picture that there was the level of poverty in [this town], the drug use amongst our families. I know we hear all the statistics but they just wash over you really, to actually live that every day and be thinking that these poor little kids are dealing with that in their daily lives and that that can actually be having an impact on their own personalities . . . (Teacher 10)

Sense of agency: recognising that change is possible

This greater sense of empowerment translated for some participants into a greater sense of agency: the belief that they could bring about change. Some sought change in the broader organisational context, in relationships with external agencies involved with the children in the classroom broader educational policies. Change more often happened within the school team so that responding reflectively became the norm:

> The support was better within the leadership team and even staff, you could have that conversation and say, I'm feeling this. And they were all ok with, those who were involved in the reflections go, right, and swing into that reflective mode (Teacher 4).

Participants felt they could move from greater understanding of what was happening both internally and externally to moving towards action:

> I think that's what the circle has done as well . . . let's do this and now actively, actively using those strategies in the moment, rather than either planning the strategies and reflecting, I know you've got to actively use them (Teacher 7).

Participants wanted to be able to put their new understanding together with their existing motivation to bring about change: *As Teacher 7 said*:

> I've always cared for kids and always curriculum is a focus, but their emotional awareness and how they're able to just function, is just as, if not more important. So, being able to understand a deeper side to that, yeah, what kids like this feel, then just their backgrounds and how it's influenced them and what I can do to have an impact on those influences.

This meant for some seeking a change in culture in the staff team, from talking about problems to trying to be active in changing them. Teacher 11 commented

> . . . before we started doing reflective circles, staff in particular, would be whingeing . . . But wouldn't think about how they could go about solving their problems. So, reflective circles for me in the school environment, has changed our school's staff thinking to salutogenic thinking. So, that problem solving, rather than, I've got this problem and I'm just going to talk about it, but I don't want to fix it.

These changes did translate for some participants into changes in their classrooms.

> I think I said [I worked with students] with the calmer approach or the different approach to things. There's been some really tough kids . . . I think that more conscious effort to understand and do stuff really made it better for the kids to respond. They responded a lot better than if I just went in and hadn't thought through or I wasn't as calm and collected, those sorts of things. (Teacher 5)

Finally Teacher 5 affirmed: '*I've seen from the start of the term to the end of the term, some amazing turn arounds [in students] and some huge growth from them.*'

Discussion

Luthar et al. (2000) acknowledge that while teachers are essential in promoting childhood resilience, they experience high levels of stress, so need ongoing support to reduce otherwise inevitable burnout (Graham et al., 2011). What has clearly emerged from our research is a form of support valued by principals *and* teachers with a peer-based reflective and mutual model underpinned by a critically reflective approach (Gardner, 2014). Peer supervision means engaging with others with, most likely, similar experiences, sharing a frame of reference that encourages empathy (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014) as well as a forum where workers are not inhibited by implicit or explicit evaluation by a senior worker. Principals and teachers alike value this way of embedding the supportive/restorative aspect of supervision (Proctor, 2008) in the school culture. They comment positively about mutuality, speaking openly and feeling supported, understood and energised by the process. We propose that this approach could be embedded in schools as a supervision model that supports and enables teachers and fosters constructive change in the classroom and organisational context more broadly.

There are four key aspects of this form of supervision as identified in the literature and supported by our findings. The peer-based reflective circles generated mutual **support** and **restoration**, partly through validation and deepening awareness of assumptions, which then **enabled** them to build confidence to act in ways that were **empowering** for them and their students, fostering a **sense of agency** to bring about change. This reflects Kadushin and Harkness's (2014, p. 162) 'supportive supervision, [which] not only releases, restores, comforts, and replenishes, but more positively inspires, animates, exhilarate and increases job satisfaction. Such supervision makes a difference between

joyless submission and ego participation, between playing notes and making music.' Peer supervision can be a safe place to share the challenges of your work and know that you will be understood and still valued. Noonoo (2019) affirms that for stressed or demoralised teachers what helps is connecting to others for mutual support.

Second is the enabling aspect of supervision which suggests emotionally supportive supervision lessens work stress O'Donoghue and Tsui (2015). Such supervision encourages workers to be 'retained in the workforce and to assist the maintenance of hopeful, positive practice' (Beddoe & Davys, 2016, p. 15). Teachers come to 'know their own knowledge' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993); sharing from their own wisdom and experience, suggesting new perceptions and possible strategies as well as building confidence through understanding their own values and beliefs Mockler (2015). Enabling here also meant the opening up of new perspectives: seeing that your assumptions may not be shared by others. This led to a liberating sense of other possible ways of seeing the world and more specifically operating in the classroom. This is particularly important in schools where a substantial number of children have experienced trauma. Building on Bloom and Farragher's (2013) observation of the inherent value in a critical, self-reflective system as part of a trauma informed care in mental and physical health care, Gherardi et al. (2020, p. 498) suggest ' that this same self-refection is required for trauma-sensitive school models to mature and enjoy the same credibility as the trauma-informed care frameworks which beget them'.

As participants shared experiences and their reactions to them, they could see the linking of the personal and professional that Day (2004) considers an essential aspect of teaching practice. Naming personal history enabled teachers to reflect more deeply on managing their reactions in the classroom; to see when their reactions were similar to and different from their students. This also enabled them to link issues to the 'bigger picture' for individual children, and the place of schools in the broader social context. The bigger picture included lack of school or community resources or issues of poverty, migration and gender. Understanding this meant some principals and teachers felt empowered: they had a greater sense of agency and being active agents for change, including from a socially just perspective. Sometimes staff could take some action about the issue either for individual children or for the school. However, as Noble et al. (2016) indicate, even when they were not able to change the context, understanding its influence felt empowering. This more critical understanding of context as Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) suggest, meant that there was a feeling of becoming energised and a shared desire to seek classroom and organisational change (Mockler, 2015).

While the participants interviewed were consistently positive about their experience of reflective circles, some suggested that not everyone might want to engage in the process given expectations of sharing about somewhat troubling experiences and the need to be able to build trust with other group members. This is also a small sample size in only three schools, and it is important to acknowledge that there are potential challenges of peer supervision as well as the benefits identified above. Beddoe and Davys (2016, p. 224) point out the possible complexity of working with colleagues and 'potentially derailing conversations' including colluding about 'problematic colleagues, managers or organisational policy'. Power differences can cause tensions if supervisors are part of the reflective

circle with those they supervise (Baker, 2013). Other barriers include constant changes of group membership that can mean trust has to be rebuilt or making it compulsory to attend even if people are reluctant (Gardner & Taalman, 2013).

We had built in some safeguards in relation to these potential challenges that we could recommend to others. At the beginning of each group, we began by establishing a group culture of confidentiality, safety, respect, non-judgemental attitudes in language that fitted the group (Fook & Gardner, 2007). This included discussion about the limits to confidentiality—if issues of risk were raised, for example. The reflective circle model has a clear structure that provides some safety in itself in that the discussion is guided by a structured set of questions that encourages moving from individual initial reactions, to exploring the influence of context and history, and the prevailing culture, both organisational and societal. The expectation for the group to operate within a particular time framework also helps maintain focus. Mutuality and shared power is reinforced by expecting everyone in the circle to participate equally, a factor that Fook and Gardner (2007) identify as an important aspect of the process. The groups were set up so that principals were in a separate group (across schools) from teachers.

It is also important to note that these participants volunteered to participate in reflective circles, strongly encouraged by their schools. The schools made a conscious and active commitment to the process that was significant in its effectiveness. They demonstrated their commitment to trialling reflective circles by building in time for them as part of the expected meeting times for teachers, although the principals in two schools committed to an extra early morning meeting time (at 7am). The orientation sessions for reflective circles were also part of the schools' time allocated for meetings and/or allocated time during the school day, rather than expecting extra time from staff, further demonstrating the schools' commitment. The importance of organisational support for reflection has been found in other research.

Conclusion

The participants in this study described very clearly how reflective circles generated key aspects of peer supervision: being supported/restored, enabled, empowered and having a sense of agency. Clearly, education needs a model that is peer based, focuses actively on shared reflection, underpinned by critically reflective understanding, and supported by the school and ideally their funding agency.

Reflective circle practice as a model of peer supervision for educators has key strengths that foster mutually supportive and enabling and empowering practice. This beginning research highlights that embedding reflective circle practice as a model of supervision holds promise for effectively supporting teachers and principals in their practice. It is key that reflective circles are structured to encourage discussion on specific experiences which leads from reactions to understanding different perspectives and then to changed attitudes and actions. This discussion will foster understanding of organisational and social context and a school community that is constructive and empowered with the energy and capacity for enhanced school and classroom experiences for staff and students.

Note

1. Specialist schools in Victoria cater for students with an IQ between 50 and 70.

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