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## Peer groups could be the answer to improving teacher wellbeing

By: Emilie Lauer in Health+Wellbeing, Top Stories, Workforce June 23, 2022 1 Comment

Exhaustion, stress and burnout are some of the reasons teachers are leaving the classroom, yet a simple peer support program might be the solution to keep teachers afloat.

A new study by La Trobe University used peer support techniques borrowed from frontier health workers to boost teacher's well-being and showed promising results.

The concept is based on 'reflective circles', where six teachers (including one taking on the role of facilitator), use critical reflection to discuss the challenges faced in the classroom and generate strategies to tackle the issues.

According to La Trobe University master of education coordinator Dr Anne Southall, the model can cover anything from disruptive students to unhappy parents.

"I think [people] really underestimated the complex emotional and intellectual work demands that are on teachers daily," Southall told *Education Review*.

"Teachers have about a thousand interactions a week; that's an awful lot of interactions, and we're all recovering from those.

"With the overlay of COVID, the mental health and wellbeing of our students and our teachers is at an all-time low.

"They're all in really big trouble and you can't blame them for leaving the profession."

The study demonstrated that by using reflective practice, teachers could freely discuss issues they faced at school and receive feedback from their peers, presenting them with different perspectives.

The process is first accessible via online training, where teachers learn how to assess themselves and give constructive and non-judgmental feedback.

The group session will then last for an hour and a half, with a twice per term frequency.

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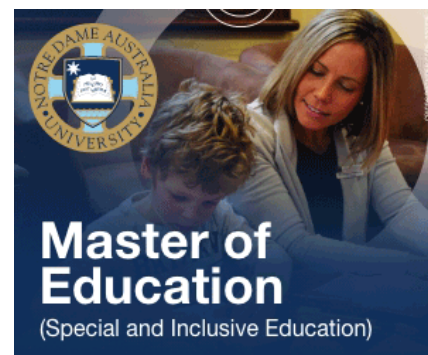


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With the support group, teachers have to reflect in an online journal about the difficult situations they face in the classroom and analyse their emotions and feelings toward them, before deconstructing it for the group.

The rest of the group will then listen to each other, give feedback and try to find a solution together with the help of a facilitator.

"It's not advice-giving and it's not 'what they should have done or shouldn't have done'. It's simply how differently they think about it and they take on another perspective," Southall said.

"There's no back and forth interaction, and then the next person shares and so on.

"With that the person realises that their way of looking at things is not the only way: that there are many ways to view a situation."

According to Southall, the experience creates deep bonds between the team and helps teachers liberate themselves of their frustrations which by extension will help teachers avoid burnout.

"One of the big contributors to burnout is the discrepancy between what you're really feeling inside and the feelings that you're actually showing.

"Teachers feel very strong negative emotions, and they're masking them most of the time.

"With the peer group they get to process them properly with people who truly understand."

By being honest about their feelings, teachers have a "huge load taken off their shoulders", Southall said, and they accept and feel better about themselves.

Teachers are given a place to process their feelings and deal with their frustration and anger, but also learn how to let go of things that are not under their control.

In certain situations, teachers will spend days and nights ruminating on what they could have done differently, and these thoughts follow them home.

Southall believes that processing these thoughts and stopping thinking about them is incredibly important as ruminating is a "great emotional labour".

"Without these processes, teachers think about their students all the time. To let go is a very healing experience, and it lightens their load a lot."

In addition to letting go of their difficult experiences, Southall mentioned that the peer group also gives teachers a space where they feel listened to and understood.

"Teachers often think they're the only ones struggling with issues because they think it's something wrong with them or they're not good enough somehow," she said.

"With the peer group, they felt more confident because they realised they weren't the only one and that they were struggling with issues."

According to Southall, it is more important than ever to take care of our teacher's mental health as there is a correlation between teachers and students' well-being.

A dysregulated teacher really does have an impact on the classes, she said, adding if there's high levels of stress, students will experience that.

Likewise, healthy teachers whose emotional needs are being met can instead use that space for dysregulated, anxious and stressed kids present in their classrooms.

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Email [eleanor.campbell@news.com.au](mailto:eleanor.campbell@news.com.au)

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### ONE COMMENT

William Brown

June 24, 2022 at 8:09 am (Edit)

Trouble is most of the stress in teaching doesn't happen in the classroom, it comes from ridiculous policies and agenda being pushed down from education department 'wannabes' looking to push for their next step up the ladder. Most classroom teachers I work with feel stress from being loaded with extra workloads which are generally irrelevant to the task of teaching a class. And most of the time, any discussion of these matters by class teachers is shut down by regional directors, principals and deputies as it may affect their chance of promotion if they kick against the system.

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