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Trialling critical reflection in education: the benefits for school leaders and teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experience of leaders and teachers in two Australian primary schools who were seeking more effective ways to respond to students with challenging behaviours and improve their classroom climates. The schools implemented a form of critical reflection as a strategy to understand their experiences, beliefs and practices within the social and cultural context of a school. School leaders and teachers adopted the Reflective Circle Education Model, a group process of reflective circles to explore their reactions to specific school experiences in order to generate new practices that might bring classroom change. After six reflective circles, staff were interviewed and they reported increased mutual support and validation from peers, and a deeper understanding of the values and assumptions that influenced their actions and reactions. As a result, staff also reported reduced stress and improved classroom climates.

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Introduction

Key writers on reflective practice in education, from Dewey (1925), Schön (1995), and Brookfield (2015), have advocated for the inclusion of reflection in teacher education and practice. Educational organisations have also long acknowledged the importance of reflecting on experiences and that teachers would benefit from reflecting on their practice (Zepeda, 2013). Very few schools, however, include teacher reflection in their professional practice, even though many models are well established in the health and social care professions, and represent a variety of theoretical positions (Redmond, 2006). As schools have yet to embed reflective practice as a systematic process, teacher reflection remains vague, inconsistent, and voluntary within education. We need to identify what reflective practice in education should include and its value for educators who are already beset with so many competing priorities within their current roles; a model of reflective practice that teachers are willing to trial and value. This article outlines the trialling of an approach to embedding reflective practice in two schools in Victoria, Australia and the benefits identified by school leaders and teachers.

Literature review

Reflective practice and education

Dewey's (1925) concept of teacher reflection, a form of inquiry where thinking, reflection, and action are interdependent, begins with identifying a particular situation that is problematic, confusing or uncertain. By constructing meaning and framing the problem, the inquirer begins a process of involving themselves in solving the problem, constructing their own meaning and potentially bringing new knowledge into being. Continual reflection, Dewey (1925) argued, enables ongoing generation of meaning and problem solving within the context of practice and should be central in the work of teachers.

Extending Dewey's theory, Schön (1995) challenged educators to deliberately immerse themselves in confusing situations and through reflection generate new knowledge and understanding. In making experiences explicit, teachers can reflect on them by subjecting to critique 'the strategies, assumptions, or problem-settings implicit in a whole repertoire of situational responses' (Schön, 1995, p. 31). Without this conscious effort, teachers have a tacit 'knowing in action' that often remains unspoken; not critiqued, affirmed or changed. Schön (1995) also suggested that observing, describing, and reflecting on experiences creates knowledge that can be synthesised into a larger and more comprehensive understanding, useful in new situations.

Through a reflective process, teachers may identify disparities between their beliefs and how they express these in practice, what Schön (1983, p. 33) described as the difference between 'espoused theories and theories in use'. Reflective practices encourage checking internally whether reactions mirror preferred beliefs and values. Shandomo (2010) and Burbank et al. (2012) see critical reflection as not only including problem identification, but also detailed introspection about how beliefs, assumptions, and experiences influence perceptions of the self and the environment in order to change or strengthen those practices in the future.

Reflective teachers proactively participate in formulating wise decisions regarding instructional practices that impact on themselves, the students, and the school (Derenowski, 2018). Making clear decisions to improve situations and to explore options through collaboration, teachers require a 'thinking awareness' (McNiff, 2013) and a commitment of care for the people they serve. McNiff (2013) terms this the 'ethics of teaching' and she argues that by adopting a critically reflective attitude towards their practice and testing their research findings against public opinion, teachers are more qualified to give reasoned justifications for their actions. Reflective teaching, based on consistent and systematic review of educational practices and problems, also fosters growth in the teachers, the students, and the system (Derenowski, 2018).

Critical reflection

Being critically reflective means including questioning 'the criteria, power dynamics and wider structures that frame a field of practice' (Brookfield, 2015, p. 13). Through critical reflective practice, Gardner (2014, p. 5) asserts, 'individuals influence and are, in turn, influenced by those they work with, the organisations in which they are based and the prevailing culture'. Within organisations, including education systems, power resides within

the politics of personal and interpersonal relationships and in the broader social and political level of organisations (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). Through deliberately examining personal and social assumptions and policies that might be informing practice, a critically reflective approach to practice encourages exploration of both the individual and collective reality. Advocates of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2015; Fook, 2016; Gardner, 2014) emphasize the value of critical reflection for challenging broader assumptions and power dynamics that frame practice. Critical reflection explores perspectives on commonly held ideas that might 'perpetuate economic inequity, deny compassion, foster a culture of silence, and prevent people from realizing a sense of common connectedness' (Brookfield 2015, p. 18). As Fook (2011, p. 64) concludes, critical reflection 'may yield new and invaluable insights about professional practice and about ourselves as human beings within it'.

Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection, encompasses the broader view of critical reflection not only reflexively exploring the feelings, thoughts, values, and assumptions that influence an individual's practice, but also the wider social practices and assumptions in which they are framed. Through participation in dialogue, individual reflection and social communication with others, individuals negotiate and reflect on experiences to understand how perceptions influence, and are influenced by, their social and political context (Gardner, 2014). If teachers are to become critically reflective in this way, they need opportunities to go beyond their daily experiences and to perceive teaching as a wider social and cultural phenomenon (Brookfield, 2015). This is often challenging for teachers given their lack of training in this way of thinking and of opportunities for such discussion combined with time pressures, high workloads and major expectations of administrative requirements. What helps is when schools allow time for such opportunities, structuring critical reflection as part of time allocated for staff meetings. The structured system for sharing examples in reflective circles can then open up discussion of the factors influencing school experience that are both within and broader than the individual school system.

While teacher reflection on, and in, practice has long been recognised as tool for exploration (Dewey, 1933; Lewin, 1946; Schön, 1983), we are advocating critical reflection here to provide a scaffold for practitioners to reframe their thinking within the broader context of organisations (Fook, 2010; Gardner, 2014; Morgan, 2017; Rolfe et al., 2011; Schön, 1987). When an individual's thinking is critically analysed and combined with colleagues' experiences and perceptions, resultant assumptions and beliefs can become powerful sources of insight and change. Teachers and school leaders given an opportunity to critically reflect might reframe their thinking and gain deeper understanding of their experiences, as have health professionals who participate in critical reflection.

Group reflection

While engaging in individual self-reflection has value, teaching is essentially a social practice, so there are advantages in group reflection. Groups offer the benefit of greater diversity of perspectives and ideas, which can also lead to conflict or unhelpful competitiveness to be 'right' if not handled well (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). Setting up the groups with clear expectations or ground rules helps with this (Ruch, 2016) by making expectations explicit. Inevitably in a group each individual has less time, but this potential disadvantage is balanced by learning from others in the group (Gardner, 2016).

Edward's work on relational agency (Edwards, 2005, 2009; Edwards & D'arcy, 2004) identified group reflection as a form of professional interaction that develops in an organisational context where people act according to the needs and wishes of the group, as well as their own. The power of the group is in 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) and so strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems (Edwards, 2009). The advantage of such 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2000) rests with their ability to transform practice given all 'learning combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures' (Wenger, 2000, p. 227). Teachers create meaning from their experiences and the organisational context in which they work that both informs and transforms their practice through the interactions of members. It follows then that the process of reflection, engaging people in examining the social practices that connect them with others in social interactions, will encourage both exploration and transformation of personal and social contexts. This study uses a model of group reflection – reflective circles, designed specifically for education settings (Southall, 2019).

Materials and methods

Context

Two schools situated in a low socio-economic area in regional Australia that were deemed socio-educationally disadvantaged (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2019), a government and a non-government primary school, expressed interest in reflective circle practice after attending a disruptive pedagogies professional development day that included trauma-informed practice, critical reflection, and reflective circle practice. At the outset of the study, school staff described their daily challenges and frustrations in managing student behaviour. The schools initially expressed interest in the study because they wanted to increase their capacity to respond to students who demonstrated challenging behaviour and improve the classroom climate. They hoped reflective circles would support them in changing their practice. This paper reports the evaluation of critical reflection in an educational setting by answering the research question: How does participation in reflective circles improve the classroom/school experience for teachers and school leaders?

Reflective circle methodology

Gardner's (2014) model of critical reflection was adapted by Southall (2019) for educational settings and her Reflective Circle Education Model is used in this study. In Gardner's (2014) two-stage model of critical reflection, participants choose an experience that has frustrated, puzzled or confused them to firstly explore their reactions, underlying values and assumptions and the influence of their own and the broader social context and history, and secondly, to explore the implications of their new understanding for changed practice. This was adapted by Southall (2019) for educational settings using similar questions, but with a more specific process and timing as outlined below, including an online component and this Reflective Circle Education Model is used in this study.

Southall's Reflective Circle Education Model demonstrated success for teachers in special education settings working with traumatised students by supporting them both personally and professionally.

The reflective circles comprised 4–6 group members, as advocated by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), to allow multiple perspectives and yet remain a small group (Kitzinger, 1995). Each reflective circle was led by a facilitator and prior to each reflective circle, participants completed an online journal entry, responding to guiding questions that related to a prior experience. The thinking and feeling around the experience and meaning derived from it formed the basis of the initial deconstruction phase of the reflective circle. Each participant presented a short summary of the journal entry to the group and the others responded, providing multiple perspectives and provoking deeper thinking. For the second reflective circle phase, a period of reconstruction (Gardner, 2014), participants drew from the reflections of others to consider new meanings and perspectives, which allowed participants to reframe their experience and commit to an intentional action or response.

Participant selection, data collection and analysis

All participants consented to being interviewed at intervals throughout the study and 12 participants were available for interview in the data collection period reported. The reflective circles included two teacher groups, and one leadership group that comprised leaders from both schools. Reflective circles were held twice per school term, either before or after a school day for approximately an hour and a half. The teacher reflective circles began with five teachers each; however, in one group, a teacher began maternity leave just prior to this interview period. The leadership reflective circle comprised four members and one transferred to another school during term four of 2019, so the three remaining members were interviewed. We use pseudonyms for all participants to maintain the anonymity of staff and schools and to comply with ethical permissions.

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants – nine teachers and three principals, at the end of the first study year to explore the experience of participating in reflective circles. At the time of interview, all participants had been involved in at least six reflective circles. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and participants were de-identified. Additional data used in analysis comprised researcher diary notes and other artefacts – meeting notes and email conversations (Creswell, 2012).

Preliminary exploratory analysis involved initial reading and re-reading interview transcripts to increase familiarity with the content (Neale, 2016), and memoing, which provided a general sense of the data (Creswell, 2012). Thematic analysis used a step-by-step process with researchers independently seeking themes through inductive coding, which provided multiple perspectives to interpret the data (Creswell, 2012). Data were organised according to provisional and descriptive codes. Through reading and re-reading the data carefully (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) patterns within the data were recognised and emergent themes were formed. After several iterations and clustering of themes, the researchers through discussion identified major themes, which were assigned concise phrases (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), and minor themes were subsumed under each of the major themes (Creswell, 2012). The major themes identified were (1) the social-emotional experience; (2) deepening understanding of selves and others; (3) renewed

energy and confidence; (4) changes in staff approaches; and (5) the impact on students and classroom climate.

Results

The social emotional experience

Reflective circles provided school staff with social and emotional support and were beneficial personally and professionally. They provided an opportunity to ‘catch up and [a] chance to listen and hear people speak’ (James) and to receive feedback from colleagues, such as: ‘You do this really well’ (Ella), which was affirming. There was some initial caution ‘shar[ing] some pretty vulnerable situations with each other’ (Will); however, that anxiety quickly dissipated:

The first reflective circle we had, I said, look like I’m a bit nervous, like I don’t really like to open up about things and they were real supportive and then before I know it, I was just like, blah. Here’s everything ... Nothing you say will be too silly. (Ella)

Most often, staff said being heard was important because usual conversations between staff related to students. Harry observed, ‘we are so, so immersed in [the students’] lives and their problems, that ours are overlooked’. As a result, school staff were relatively unaware of each others’ challenges. Reflective circles were ‘a forum where you can speak openly ... in a safe place’ (Harry). Staff felt safe to ‘offload some of the things’ (Ben) that were challenging in their lives and work, which in turn informed others when they were not coping well. Rather than feel more exposed and vulnerable, Emelia perceived greater support because ‘there are people out there who understand and who know your story ... [and] you’ve got that back up’.

Staff were genuinely surprised their colleagues were ‘really open actually and very honest and forthcoming’ (Megan). They had anticipated that revealing vulnerabilities, such as ‘I’m really struggling with this’ (Ben), would be very challenging. Instead, they found reflective circles were supportive and caring and they felt respected and valued. Sharing personal information for the first time, Emelia reported: ‘that was massive for me, and I think for them as well. They all sort of responded really positively ... so that was really nice’. William shared an experience he felt he had misread; however, his colleagues’ reactions authenticated his interpretation and reaction, and he was then more confident in saying, ‘This isn’t ok’.

School staff valued the safety and trust engendered in reflective circles. Danny explained that with reflective circles, ‘I’ve got some safe people I want to talk with about it, and these people are going to help me solve my problem, and this is how I’m going to go about it’. For other staff, ‘the circles have definitely deepened what [collegial connection and trust] looks like’ (William), which has spilled out beyond the reflective circles. At one school, the leaders remarked on changes in staff attitudes and how colleagues in a staff meeting ‘talked about the value of the staff, the camaraderie, [and] the support from each other’ (Debbie).

Staff were genuinely astonished that others also had challenging experiences in their classrooms that lead to feelings of ineptitude and exhaustion, knowledge that created a mutuality and validation in sharing their challenging experiences. With

widely varying backgrounds and perspectives that informed their equally diverse understandings and approaches to classroom practice and challenging behaviours, they realised ‘others are also feeling what you’re feeling ... [and it is] nice to know it’s not just you’ (staff meeting notes from 10 September 2019).’ Reflective circles provided a space for staff ‘to acknowledge what you actually feel and not have to hide it’ (William), which as Ella explained, ‘just makes me feel a lot more confident and able to share things’. The benefits of reflective circles were mutual, as staff enjoyed ‘not only being able to debrief with colleagues, but also to support them’ (William). In exchanging ideas and receiving feedback without judgment, staff expanded and refined teaching skills and strategies. Hannah reported advocating strongly for a student, saying that it was through reflective circles that she developed the courage to persist and succeed. She describes the overriding positive sentiment of all staff:

[The] group has been like, I guess a bit of a pressure release valve whereas things could have kept building and I could have kept worrying and being anxious. I had a chance to talk about it and find solutions and different pathways, so it didn’t just keep compounding ... I just feel really privileged to have all of those people sit and listen to me and give me that time and ... that other people have shared things with me as well (Hannah)

Deepening understanding of selves and others

Through the reflective process, staff deepened their understanding of the underlying contributors to challenging experiences. They recognised that specific situations were fraught with judgment based on their assumptions. Leah said that while her initial thinking about an incident began with the online journal, her assumptions and understanding of the incident were guided by reflective circle questions. She explained: ‘you’re delving deeper about [yourself], where has that come from for you, in your own childhood’ (Leah). Through introspection, teachers were able to identify and examine their own values and see the importance of ‘actually taking that time to reflect on that [experience] and consciously understanding that, and appreciating that allows you to grow and to change’ (Megan).

The reflective circle process brought into sharp focus participants’ awareness that their underlying beliefs influence their actions. For many participants, it was the first time they had made conscious their own underlying assumptions when evaluating challenging experiences. This shifted the practice of one school leader to stop and consider: ‘What assumptions am I making here, or what background should I be considering?’ (Tony). Many reported how helpful it was to make conscious their own assumptions and those of students – ‘different generation, different backgrounds, different upbringings, all those things’ (Megan) that contribute to students’ attitudes and behaviours. Reflective circles led one school leader to an epiphany:

When I did the reflection and came down to it, my underlying, absolute baseline assumption was that a mother is supposed to protect her child. I don’t think it ever occurred to me, but this was a real and absolute deep personal ‘aha’ moment; there are actually people who do not. (Debbie).

Renewed energy and confidence

Staff reported that over time they felt an energy shift, from feeling weighed down by seemingly relentless challenging experiences to feeling lighter and less stressed. William described the positive effect of reflective circles as ‘a therapeutic experience . . . just being able to actually articulate and just having that reset coming back down’. With reflective circles offering ‘a bit of a pressure release valve’ (Hannah), staff reported feeling calmer, more confident and relaxed about their professional practice and leaving reflective circles ‘in a lot better place’ (Emelia) than when they go in. As Ben described,

it [children’s trauma and life challenges] does weigh you down a lot, but being able to have that sort of open forum where you can speak openly you know, in a safe space has allowed me certainly to feel much better, much lighter (Ben)

At one school, reflective circles generated a universal shift for staff who felt less overwhelmed because they were able to identify both ‘good days and bad days’ (Staff meeting, 10 September 2019). Leaders also reported a noticeable and unexpected positive shift in staff from reflective circle practice:

. . . the level of engagement and the level of enthusiasm, and to watch them, because they walk out of their reflective circles exactly the same as [leadership] do, like a weight’s been lifted, they’re all happy. It’s so, it’s absolutely life giving, it really is, yeah. (Debbie)

Feeling ‘a lot more confident in walking in [to work] each day’ (Ella), staff report feeling more positive and energised. Hannah commented ‘there were times when I thought, this particular situation’s quite difficult, . . . I won’t put so much energy into that, but I kept putting energy into it because of the support of the group’.

Changes in staff approaches

The process of critical reflection revitalised the way staff felt about themselves and their professional practice, and approaches to student behaviour began to transform. It ‘assisted people to look at [experiences] from a different point of view, so . . . when a child is acting up, you’re thinking, hold on, let me take ten seconds to analyse what’s going on here’ (Danny). Harry learnt to ‘take a step outside and just separate yourself a bit, and go, ok cool, let’s collect myself’. Staff were able to see the bigger picture by being ‘mindful of where you are, where the student is, [and] what interactions are happening with all the other kids’ (William). A school leader described the change to a more introspective approach:

taking a little bit more time to think through a process and how are we going to deal with this and rather than jumping in. Just to say ok, let’s just slow down here for a minute, and so trying to build that own reflection into things that you do like you do in the circles. (Tony)

This led to new perspectives and responses to students’ challenging behaviours and escalating situations.

Purposeful responses to complex situations were also informed through the sharing of ideas and strategies, both personal and professional, which benefitted all reflective circle members. Emelia explained, ‘Everyone just brings so much knowledge and so much information and you get a real big wide picture about . . . things that you don’t consider’.

In Harry's opinion, 'It's reflection but it's also taking some advice on things that I've never even thought of'. Learning from each other strengthened and transformed practice.

Impact on students and classroom climate

Students were the beneficiaries of their transformed professional practice and behaviour, according to teachers and school leaders. Increased confidence and collegial support enabled staff to critically reflect on their personal beliefs and professional practice, which led to deeper understanding of students and the complexity of school situations, from which new insights and transformed reactions to students were born. Reporting the benefits of reflective circles, Ben remarked: 'I suppose as a result, you know, [I] have a more positive influence and relationship with the students'. Danny's changed approach now begins with:

mak[ing] sure you're looking at all of the factors that are affecting that child, and the decisions that they're choosing to make. You're getting to know your student more, you're thinking about what are some different options I can take, instead of the straight, get out, I need a break from you. It's, how can I help you today. (Danny)

Emelia explained:

It's changed the way I think about managing the students because it's more about supporting them than managing them. So, the reason in my opinion, the reason you need to manage them is because they're missing something. So, if you are supporting them then the need to manage them is invalid ... so that has been a big learning experience for me because I, that understanding around supporting them instead of managing them, came from looking at how I do that in the classroom. (Emelia)

Discussion

Both schools were situated in a low socioeconomic area with educationally vulnerable students, including many with challenging behaviours that concerned leadership and teaching staff. The wellbeing of all students was a priority and motivated staff, even when daily behavioural challenges left staff feeling exhausted and ineffective. The concept of reflective circles, encouraged staff, like those in Šarić and Šteh (2017, p. 81) study to show 'curiosity, willingness to wonder, open-mindedness, and desire for growth'. Staff indicated they had found little else that provided the social and emotional support and professional mentoring to sustain them in their daily challenges. After three terms of reflective circle practice, staff at both schools identified substantial improvements in their socio-emotional wellbeing, their interpretation of incidents, and their approaches to student behaviours. For example, rather than simply reacting to a child's behaviour by asking them to leave the classroom and see the principal, teachers would pause and ask themselves what both the child and themselves as teachers were reacting to and why? This pause would allow space to consider other ways of reacting that would defuse the situation.

Reflective circles provided the social and emotional benefits to school leaders and teachers and sense of wellbeing Morgan (2017) argues all practitioners need. Teachers had often felt isolated and thought their challenges in dealing with student behaviours

were unique. These perceptions contributed to high levels of frustration and lack of efficacy that Heirweg et al. (2021) attribute to a lack of reflective dialogue. Reflective circles challenged and transformed those perceptions as staff realised challenges they thought were unique, other staff were also experiencing. Brookfield (1998) identified this as a significant aspect of critical reflection, enabling participants to see common issues related to their context. School leaders and teachers felt safe to honestly and openly share their experiences, similar to participants identified by Gardner (2014) and they were able to 'critique their own practice' as advocated by McNiff (2011, p. 293).

A valuable aspect of reflective circles was the time and space it gave teachers to critically reflect on their practice (Hernandez & Endo, 2017). Like those in Gardner and Taalman (2013) study, they found that other reflective circle members were interested in, and supportive of, each other's personal and professional experiences and were willing to share and be challenged by other perspectives and approaches (Gardner, 2014). Building strategies through group experience was valuable in enhancing professional practice through checking interpretation of circumstances with those of colleagues (Brookfield, 1998; Edwards, 2009).

The reflective circle's deconstruction phase allowed teachers to explore their thoughts and feelings, and underpinning values and assumptions. Reflecting on their experiences, staff articulated their feelings and actions, making conscious their deeply held beliefs and seeing the differences between their 'espoused theories and theories in use' (Schön, 1995, p. 33). Through critically reflecting, staff recognised how their own backgrounds were the tacit drivers of their actions and reactions, and contributed to their responses. The kinds of 'aha' moments identified by other writers (Fook, 2010; Morgan, 2017; Rolfe et al., 2011) were significant. Several staff members had profound realisations about underlying beliefs and value systems that proved cathartic in their understanding and in reframing their approaches.

Interrogating challenging experiences and group discussion also lead to reassessment of how teachers and school leaders interpreted and responded encouraging deeper understanding. While the influence of deeply held personal and professional beliefs systems (Derenowski, 2018) was one aspect of interpretation, it also became clear that staff needed to stop and 'take a step back' when confronted with a challenging situation, rather than making assumptions and reacting immediately. This allowed staff sufficient time to ruminate and consider the perspectives of all actors, instead of only through their own lens. By considering students' perspectives, staff gained greater insight of the frequently challenging situations they experienced and were able to make more informed decisions before responding.

Through mutual support and validation from the reflective circle group, and a greater awareness of the influence underlying values have on actions and reactions, staff attitudes began to change. There was a shift in staff productivity, motivation and wellbeing at both schools. School staff identified reflective circles as central to school staff feeling less stressed about their work and more positive in their professional capacity. With increasing confidence and positive attitudes, staff felt more 'energised' and reported feeling 'lighter'. No longer overwhelmed, staff approaches to behaviour were more considered and proactive.

With renewed energy, bolstered by the group support, staff developed purposeful responses to the complex situations they were experiencing regularly. Their 'community

of practice' in Wenger's (2000) terms became more explicit and more helpful. Through considering the multiple perspectives of the group, individuals were able to formulate new ways of responding. Using the metaphor of a village to describe reflective circles, one teacher who persevered with seeking a diagnosis for a student wrote: 'I could have stopped trying or not known what else to try. She [the student] will never know the work from "the village" that was behind her diagnosis and the impact it will have on her from now on, but we will' (Hannah – email, 27 January 2019). Staff had a more nuanced approach to students. For example, rather than labelling a student as 'difficult', a teacher could identify that students had 'good and bad' days. Making this explicit meant they were able to be more patient with the bad days and allow more flexibility for the student. Overall, staff used reflective skills to stop and check the dynamics of their relationships with children to say, for example, I'm reacting from my own issues here, not the child's and so I need to consider changing my behaviour.

Changes that occurred in school leaders' and teachers' wellbeing and their practice were clearly articulated, as was the impact on their students' behaviour. Rae et al. (2017) explain that from a socio-emotional perspective, the wellbeing of teachers impacts the relationships they build with students, and in turn, student behaviour and outcomes. School staff found teacher–student relationships were more positive and the classroom climate improved. Like Šarić and Šteh (2017, p. 67) participants, teachers' critical reflection also contributed 'to new insights, knowledge reframing, and the introduction of such changes in teaching that will support students' learning and the development of the community for the better learning, work, and life of all its individuals'.

Reflective circles informed and transformed the practice of teachers and school leaders. They were renewed and empowered through the critically reflective process and the group experience, and progressively became more self-assured professionals. As Brookfield (1998, p. 200) emphasised two decades ago: 'Just knowing that we are not alone in our struggles can be a life-saving realization. Although critical reflection often begins alone, it is, ultimately, a collective endeavor'. With the collective support garnered through reflective circle practice, teachers equipped with new strategies and the capacity to understand their own actions and reactions became more effective and invigorated.

Concluding remarks

The benefits of using reflective circles underpinned by a critically reflective approach were clearly experienced by the participants in this study. School leaders and teachers affirmed the positive effects of mutual support and validation, including the lessening of tensions, the opening up of new perspectives and strategies, and the deepening understanding on their own assumptions and values, and how these influence their classroom practice. Greater awareness of the impact of the organisational and social context also enabled them to perceive issues differently and to change their interactions with each other and their students.

The benefits to school leaders and teachers of the Reflective Education Model developed over only six reflective circle experiences, over three school terms. We suggest that as a longer term embedded practice in the schools, there will likely be sustained gains in confidence and improvement in practice, and the collegial trust engendered through

circles will permeate to increase staff morale overall. However, this is a small study in only two schools in one region. Further investigation of the influence of reflective circle practice in schools is required to determine the longer-term gains for staff in these schools, but also more broadly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Lindy P. Baxter is an early career researcher with a background in education. Her research has focused on seeking ways to improve the school experience of students in low SES schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students with backgrounds of trauma. Lindy's current research involves supporting teachers' complex and demanding work when educating students with challenging behaviours through implementing and evaluating the efficacy of the Reflective Circle Education Model in low SES schools.

Anne E. Southall has over 30 years of experience working in the field of special education and mainstream primary schools in both Australia and the UK. In her current role she coordinates the Master of Inclusion and Diversity and lectures in trauma studies at La Trobe University. Her research involves working in partnership with education providers in regional Victoria Australia to develop more trauma informed pedagogies through critically reflective processes.

Fiona Gardner coordinates social work education across four rural campuses in Victoria, Australia as Associate Professor and Discipline Lead for Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University's Rural Health School. Her research and teaching focuses on the value of critical reflection and critical spirituality as frameworks for understanding and engaging more deeply with issues for individuals and communities. Her publications include *Being Critically Reflective* (2014) and *Working in Human Service Organisations* (2016).

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