



A Report for the Centre for Social Work Practice on Reflective Practice Group Models in Social Work

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October 2014

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- I. Introduction 1
- II. Methodology 1
- III.RPG models identified in the Literature Search..... 2
- IV.Models-in-use 9
- V. Evaluation 15
- VI.Current Policy Context 15
- VII..References 16

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I. Introduction

The Centre for Social Work Practice is a national charity which aims to promote, develop and disseminate good practice in social work with a particular emphasis on relationship based models of work. Reflective practice is an essential part of relationship based practice, but the absence of skilled and consistent provision of reflective supervision, both individual and group based, in most social work and social care organisations is one of the most frequently identified obstacles to the advancement of good practice. CfSWP wishes to contribute to the development and provision of high quality reflective supervision in a number of ways – through direct provision of reflective supervision groups, led by skilled practitioners, to individuals and organisations, by offering training and development in group and individual supervision, and by building a more robust evidence base for the effectiveness and professional value of reflective group supervision.

As a first step towards fulfilling these goals we commissioned this review of current models and availability of reflective practice groups (RPGs) from Dr Jocelyn Jones. Our next step will be to engage a researcher or small research team to design and implement an evaluative methodology for RPGs. At the time of writing (May 2015) CfSWP is already engaged in some limited direct provision of RPG work to organisations, with a number of other similar initiatives at an earlier stage of planning.

This report is a valuable contribution in its own right to the literature on RPGs, and we hope that it will be the basis, alongside other current initiatives around the country, of a considerable 'push' to strengthen this vital aspect of professional practice.

CfSWP would welcome expressions of interest in developing, or supporting the development, of reflective practice groups in any setting, and in any part of the UK. Please visit the website for more information, and for details of how to contact us – www.cfswp.org

For this report a literature search and review of suitable material was conducted between August and October 2014. This report outlines the key features of reflective practice group (RPG) models which were identified in the search as well as other models-in-use which have not been formally published.

II. Methodology

A literature search was undertaken using the electronic resources available at Royal Holloway's library; additional advice was also taken from their Subject Librarian for Social Work. Although the focus was primarily on reflective group models in social work, the search extended into models used by other professional groups. The main databases searched were: NHS Evidence (NICE), Google Scholar, Psych Info and Social Care Online. The search terms were taken from one or more of the following: reflective practice, reflective groups, critical reflection, case review, discussion model, social work, family therapy, peer supervision, group supervision, clinical

supervision, and work discussion. In order to manage the potentially diffuse scope of this review, papers, books and book chapters published since 2000 were prioritised. Although there was quite a lot of material on written reflection, much less has been written about reflective group processes and models in social work practice.

In order to supplement the literature search, contact was made with organisations and individuals known to be using different approaches to promote reflective practice in groups

III. RPG models identified in the Literature Search

The literature on reflection, critical reflection, reflexivity, and reflective practice has grown exponentially over the past decade or so with extensive debate amongst human services' professionals and academics especially. Such widespread opinion and discussion in the field generated a substantial number of papers which might potentially be of interest, but upon reading the abstract or scanning the paper itself did not fall within the scope for this review. Four main models were identified within the literature: the critical reflection model (Fook and Gardner, 2007, 2013); the relationship-based model of reflection (Ruch 2007a & b, 2009); the work discussion model (Warman and Jackson, 2007; Rustin and Bradley, 2008); and online critical reflective dialogue (Baikie, Campbell, Thornhill and Butler, 2013).

Critical reflection

This model, developed by Jan Fook and Fiona Gardner (2007, 2013) is based on reflective practice, reflexivity, postmodernism and critical social theory, and is designed to help professionals learn about their practice. The model works by unsettling and examining hidden assumptions to generate new frameworks of professional understanding and actions. The reflective practice element draws on the work of Donald Schön (1983) to understand tacit assumptions which may be influencing practice. Reflexivity focuses on the relevance of understanding self: the frames we use can influence what and how knowledge is made. It is therefore important to examine specific assumptions we make in light of our backgrounds and experience. Postmodern understandings highlight the role of language and discourse in forming meanings and interpretations, which relate to knowledge and the exercise of power. Critical perspectives examine the inter-relationship between individual thinking and behaviour and wider structural issues: individually held assumptions may be derived from a person's wider social environment. This last point is important in setting a vision for how individuals can make social changes, and emphasizes the potentially transformative characteristic of critical reflection. The Fook and Gardner model of critical reflection reveals hidden and powerful assumptions, and seeks to create a sense of agency and empower professionals. Getting to the heart or crux of the matter for each presenter, which includes the emotional aspect, is also emphasized (Fook, 2010).

The model uses discussion in small groups, comprising 3 to 12 participants, to reflect on a critical incident or recent, concrete or 'raw' event which is of significance to each presenter. This typically takes place over two and a half days. The first half day session is an introduction to the theoretical approach, process and culture of critical reflection in which the process is also modelled by the facilitator. The stage one day aims to unsettle the assumptions of each participant by group members using a range of critical reflective questions, based on the four aspects of the theoretical

framework. The stage two reflection day comprises presentations by each presenter about changed thinking and implications for practice. The key principles of the model are: learning about communication through dialogue; space for individual reflection, based on multiple perspectives from within the group; and identification of collective and social thinking whilst linking this to individual experience. Each participant needs at least 20-30 minutes to present and reflect on their critical incident so this needs to be borne in mind regarding group size. Time is also needed for introductions, ground rules and evaluation. As the model is only spread over three sessions, which are normally between a week or a month apart, it may be easier for participants to commit to. If the sessions are a month or more apart, time for recapping is needed. If stage two follows immediately on from the introductory session and stage one, then advance briefing and preparation are essential. Alternatively the workshop can be divided into five half day sessions spread over an agreed period of time.

Examples of questions, drawn from each of the four theoretical perspectives are given for both stages [see Chapters 5 to 7 for a detailed description of the process (Fook and Gardner, 2007)]. Other important practical issues are usefully highlighted: having a skilled, 'safe' facilitator, who is trusted by the group; merits of external vs. internal facilitation; overall budget; and selecting a suitable venue.

Relationship-based model of reflection

Gillian Ruch (2007a, 2007b, 2009) is a major contributor on group reflection to promote relationship-based practice in children and families work, although her thinking is transferable to other specialisms. Drawing on the work of Bion (1962), she explores the absence of 'emotionally informed thinking spaces' and of 'containment' for frontline staff. Her argument is that the main supervisory model in child and family social work is more concerned with surveillance than support, with a clear bias towards management, monitoring and narrowly defined performance indicators. Referring to the work of Cooper (2005) and Rustin (2005), she argues that anxieties and emotions and their influence on a practitioner's thoughts and actions are insufficiently addressed in current supervision. Reflective spaces within supervision to promote 'respectful uncertainty' and 'healthy scepticism', identified by Lord Laming in the Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report, are largely absent (Department of Health, 2003).

Ruch's 'thoughtful' case discussion model is partly based on the principles underpinning the Tavistock model of child observation (Briggs, 2005) and of clinical training seminars (Danbury and Wallbridge, 1989). The small group sessions start with a practitioner presenting a case they are currently working with; this normally takes around 15 minutes, including the issues that are surfacing. Group members listen attentively and do not take notes. This is an important point because it shifts participants into 'being' as opposed to 'doing' mode, and they become more emotionally connected to what is being expressed both verbally and non-verbally. Ruch refers to this as 'emotional listening'.

Once the presenter has finished, the group is asked not to pose questions directly to her/him but hold onto them for the second stage. At this point the group engages in a discussion about the case, what issues it raises for them, what caught their attention and why. Participants can also pose questions to the group; it is not a requirement that these are answered. At this stage it may

be very difficult for the group and the presenter to remain separate: there can be a tendency for the group to seek more factual details from the presenter or for the presenter to feel the need to provide more information, justify their position etc. The facilitator needs to remain vigilant at this stage and keep the group in 'wondering' mode; at the same time the presenter is encouraged to listen and observe the group discussion. Ruch (2007b) emphasises the importance of the case discussion being a very different, more inquiring forum from, say, a child protection case conference or fostering and adoption panel, where the practitioner may feel s/he is being interrogated with a demand to present 'the truth'. The case discussion model seeks to overcome defensiveness about the presenter's actions.

In the final stage the presenter returns to the whole group and engages in reflective discussion with group members about aspects of the case which have caught their attention. Ruch (2007b) cautions against allowing the group to go straight into 'problem solving' mode: the 'quick fix' approach to action that many will be familiar with in their daily experience of practice needs to be avoided. The skilled task for the facilitator is to create a generative group space where curiosity, uncertainty, and emotions are held to promote a deeper level of thinking and reflection.

Note taking in this model is discouraged to promote emotional listening and closer engagement with the case material: participants are encouraged to 'be' rather than 'do'. In this way reactive, 'quick fix' solutions are avoided and alternative perspectives offered.

Challenges to the 'thoughtful practice' case discussion model include professionals admitting to vulnerability and dependence, which leads to these forums not being widely utilized to support practice development (Ruch, 2007b). Responses may include a social worker going into victim mode (Ferguson, 2005), through complaining vociferously about colleagues and the work setting and refusing to address any vulnerability or need; using heavy workloads and the lack of time, where reflection is seen as a luxury, to argue against the introduction of the model; and saying 'We do it already', where examples of informal peer support and occasional 'corridor conversations' are cited. Ruch argues these have their place, but are no substitute for reflective case discussion groups. She also highlights the importance of 'educating' managers about the relevance and potential of the model to practice.

In a later paper (Ruch, 2009) Ruch outlines the model in more detail and offers further guidance on facilitation of the relationship-based reflection model (p.355). She also identifies 'critical' dimensions within the model with reference to critical social theory and personal and structural sources of power (Fook and Gardner, 2007). Critical social theory and critical reflection refer to 'assumptions', which are the embedded ideas individuals carry about they experience their world (Fook, 2007); these require 'unsettling' within the group for change to occur. In psycho-dynamic contexts, 'insight' takes on a similar meaning and refers to the gains an individual may experience of influences changing or shaping behaviour. Ruch argues that 'the main distinction between 'assumptions' and 'insights' relates to the role of conscious and unconscious influences on behavior' (p.353).

Within the relationship-based reflection model, individual and structural and unconscious and conscious causes of power and oppression are not considered separate: both need to be simultaneously addressed if oppression is to be averted. Furthermore the inclusion of systemic

ideas, which share common social constructionist roots with critical social theory, diminishes the risk of polarized perspectives and also complements psycho-dynamic perspectives (Burck and Cooper, 2007).

The facilitator's role is key in creating a containing, reflective space, and observing and commenting on the group discussion process as much as content. Selection and training for facilitation needs careful consideration whatever model is developed.

Given the current 'austerity' agenda in the public sector, whatever the model(s) the Centre adopts will need endorsement from senior management for practitioners to participate, and for it to be sustainable as an in-house reflective forum. It will also need to be attractive to potential participants, perhaps linking to the College of Social Work's Professional Capabilities' Framework at an appropriate level or to the recently announced new accreditation framework for child and family social workers.

Work discussion

Work discussion groups offer staff a unique opportunity to share concerns, difficulties and challenges in their work with clients (Jackson, 2005; Warman and Jackson, 2007; Jackson, 2008; Rustin and Bradley, 2008). These issues are then discussed together in a group, which is normally facilitated by an external consultant with relevant experience. The group's attention is focused on the development of reflective practice rather than being driven by managerial demands and the requirement to make decisions and come up with solutions. The intention is to get beneath the surface level of what is being said or done so the what and how of unconscious communication is considered alongside the impact on the worker and others around the client. Solutions, are not the primary goal of work discussion, but in fact, can often be forthcoming through deeper understandings which lead to more effective responses.

Like Ruch's model, work discussion is based on Bion's concept of containment. Bion's insight was in his understanding of the dynamic interplay of 'container' and 'contained' to understand emotional experience. The 'container' is Bion's term for the more mature mind (the mother in Bion's work on early psychic development) , which has capacity for observation and reflection with the ultimate goal being the transformation of aspects of emotional experience that may not yet be at the level of verbal thought or meaningfully shaped. The 'contained' is the less developed mind (the infant, in Bion's model), which requires a relationship with a container in order to develop the mind's capacity for thinking, communication and judgement (Rustin, 2008a). It is argued that there is a dynamic interplay between these two states via conscious and unconscious verbal and non-verbal communication. The baby comes to understand her/himself through parental responsiveness to her/his early somatic communications, which allows for distinctions to be made between different emotional and physical states e.g. anxiety, tiredness, hunger etc. For Bion, this model of development was an essential feature of the therapeutic potential of psychoanalysis, and for Rustin and Bradley (2008) and other contributors to their book, it is core to understanding relationships between professionals and their clients.

In identifying recurrent themes in work discussion, Rustin (2008b) highlights the importance of beginnings and endings and the impact of separation and loss reflected in both the experiences

of the workers and the children they work with. The life histories of many of the troubled children professionals encounter may be characterized by the loss of parental figures through death, abandonment and divorce or separation; loss of country through migration, exile, war or asylum; poverty, parental mental ill-health, parental substance and alcohol misuse, disability and social exclusion. When such children experience changes in their lives further down the line, acting out can become marked – sometimes to a frightening degree. This is where the psychoanalytic literature on mourning and depression (Freud, Klein, Winnicott and others) and work on attachment theory (Bowlby and current researchers like Shemmings) need to be drawn on. Rustin argues that work discussion provided an opportunity for her to understand the complexity and variety of children's lives in the UK, and she offers an illuminating example from a colleague on Traveller children and culture by way of illustration (Dollery, 2002).

Although Warman and Jackson's (2007) paper is primarily based on mental health outreach work in education settings, the authors argue for its introduction to recruit and retain social workers. The aims of the work discussion groups are stated as enabling staff to develop a deeper understanding about:

- underlying meanings of client behaviour and communication (including nonverbal communication);
- psychological factors that impact on learning, teaching, working with and caring for troubled and challenging clients;
- the ways in which clients can impact on staff at an emotional level and how this in turn can impact on the way staff engage and work with their clients;
- the ways in which particular client population groups can impact on wider staff and organisational culture — and vice versa . . . ; and
- ways in which adverse past experiences can hinder the development of future good experiences and relationships. (Warman and Jackson, 2007, p.39)

Warman and Jackson (2007) emphasise that ideally group membership should be voluntary, although group members should be able to commit to regular attendance, either on a weekly or monthly basis or even every 6-12 weeks. Instruction by senior management to attend should be avoided as this may be associated with underperformance or implied criticism, resulting in defensiveness and resistance. Groups work effectively with between four and 12 members; skilled facilitation, with the ability to draw on the collective expertise and potential of group members, is also highlighted. One (or sometimes two) members will present a current issue or concern which is pre-occupying them; this is most often presented verbally, although can be a written account if the presenter prefers. The 'presentation' is not PowerPoint slides or similar, in fact it is not anything polished, formal or 'perfect'.

An evaluation, based on direct verbal feedback within the groups and qualitative and quantitative data from 90 graded statement evaluation forms, completed anonymously on an annual basis, suggests that the main aims of the programme were met. However, it is not clear what the non-

return rate was on the evaluation forms. If the analysis is based on a 100% return rate then this is a significant endorsement for the model.

Proper support from senior managers is essential. Warman and Jackson (2007, p.44) argue that the work discussion model, when offered in a regular way and sustained over time, can help staff to:

- develop professional skills, confidence and job satisfaction;
- deepen understanding of clients and the impact clients have on workers;
- develop the capacity to manage disturbing relationships that clients sometimes build with workers;
- reduce work-related staff stress, insecurity and absence; and
- promote the development of reflective practice within the wider culture of the organisation.

It is argued that the model not only helps the presenter with their particular issue, but helps all participants extend their thinking to enhance relationship-based practice. On the basis of the evaluation findings, Warman and Jackson suggest that the model has potential to be offered to children and families' social workers, although the model is in fact used with people working in all sectors of social care and mental health related work. External facilitation, by someone not involved in the day-to-day caseload management, is recommended to reflect on feelings and processes that may be raised by this work. Like teachers, frontline staff in social work can feel isolated and insecure about their practice with poor staff morale and high turnover influencing workplace climate and culture (Jones and Gallop, 2003).

Online reflection

More recently the Fook-Gardner model of critical reflection has been adapted for a web-based university course platform (Baikie et al, 2013). The Critical Reflection Dialogue Group (CRDG) approach was adopted by the School of Social Work, Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and is a core component of its campus-based and distance learning Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme. The theoretical orientation of the CRDG is consistent with the Fook-Gardner model, but places more emphasis on socio-cultural theorizing: transformational and experiential learning theory are key influences on the CRDG, alongside extensive 'embellishment' with intercultural, Freirian, critical and feminist pedagogies. Transformational learning is explained as 'the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (Mezirow, 1997, p.162). The learners' 'frame of reference', which is composed of 'habits of mind' (ibid) is the focus of change. The role of critical reflection is to transform these cognitive constructs that have been influenced through established and entrenched cultural assimilation. Mezirow's ideas are derived from the notion of 'Communicative learning', where the focus is on 'understanding the meaning of what others communicate'; these meanings are governed by social norms and cultural codes which determine what is or is not acceptable (p.8). It is argued by Baikie et al (2013) that Mezirow's orientation merges well with the Paolo Friere's liberation intent (Pietrykowski, 1996), and with the 'attitudinal transformations' needed for transcultural learning (Nagda, 2006). Psychological, pedagogical and

communicative theoretical orientations are needed to promote meaningful group encounters (Popa and Cozma, 2009).

The CRDG forum uses the university's Blackboard Learning System to provide the course site platform. The forum has a clear emphasis on skilled facilitation by either a faculty member or highly trained teaching assistant; it is offered exclusively online as 'a stand-alone, web-based, purposeful pedagogical method, as opposed to a course activity' (Baikie et al, 2013, p. 222). Advantages of the online environment are that: participants' post their reflections, and this 'capturing' in text renders reflections more accessible to participants and facilitators; the relative anonymity of web-based forums helps form a climate of support, openness and trust required for transformative learning (Taylor, 2007); and there are less impediments to the frequency and amount any one student can participate. Baikie et al (2013, p. 223) outline the adaptations that needed to be made to the Fook-Gardner model to expose 'problematic habits of the mind', explore 'the subtleties of power', and develop 'insights into the interconnection between our personal and collective experiences and macro-discursive and structural conditions'. The goal of facilitation, from their perspective, is to move participants through a critical reflective analysis of a story, both individually and collectively, so that 'problematic habits of mind' are exposed.

Each group discussion takes place on the Main Discussion Board, and begins on a Monday and finishes the following Sunday. Upon entering students see the Course Content page, which has links to the facilitators' biographies; group participation guidance; a slide presentation to orient participants; criteria for critical incidents/ stories; and some core critically reflective questions. Through a side bar menu, students have access to Announcements, Mail, Calendar and Discussions. Students are expected to take part in the forum for a total of one and a half hours in the week, which comprises reading, thinking about and then responding to prior postings. Following an 'Announcement' critical incidents are emailed to the facilitator in advance, which ensures they are suitable as a first posting. Baikie et al (2013) outline in some detail the criteria for a critical incident/ story; the use of 'The Mirror' to reground participants' insights from their postings within themselves; and the Native North American Talking Circle principles, which underpin dialogue within the groups.

Although no formal evaluation is included in the chapter, Baikie et al (2013, p228) offer anecdotal feedback from the 'Closing Circle' discussion thread, which indicates an appreciation of the opportunity to make sense of individual and group-based experiences, including participants questioning their own 'truths' and notions of themselves as being 'open', 'accepting' and 'non-judgemental', and committing to 'really listen' with 'humility'.

Although derived from the Fook-Gardner model of critical reflection, an online 'Talking Circle' reflective space has the potential, based on a suitable fusion of psychodynamic, systemic and critical perspectives, to be used as a safe space to explore relationship-based practice without fear of undue exposure. This anonymity in mixed groups might be more attractive to social work employers and social workers; for example, more potentially contentious professional issues relating to overwhelming emotions, such as revulsion, anger or fear, could be explored more without threat of exposure or worse.

IV. Models-in-use

The Tavistock Centre – work discussion

Work discussion is a central element of most of the psychoanalytic or psycho-social training programmes offered by the Tavistock, at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels for social workers and other mental health and social care professionals. The method is extensively discussed and explored in Rustin and Bradley (2008), and in Jackson (2005,2007) as well as Warman and Jackson's work cited above. The model is related to but distinct from models of clinical supervision associated with psychotherapeutic training and practice. At the Tavistock Work Discussion often has a broader psycho-social focus, reflecting the diversity of community and non-clinical setting in which adult mental health and children's social care practitioners operate, as well as many other professional groups who train there including teachers, probation officers and nurses.

Group for the Advancement of Psychodynamics and Psychotherapy in Social Work (GAPS)

GAPS has very recently switched from running peer support groups, based on Eric Miller's Leicester/ Tavistock Model, to case reflection. Two case reflection groups have run so far on a monthly basis with five participants at the first one and nine at the second; more are planned and further information is available on the [GAPS website](#). Almost all those attending are members of GAPS.

The groups aim to support social workers and their ongoing professional development by offering a safe 'reflective space' for participants to explore experiences (and associated feelings and thoughts); and consider the importance of relationship-based practice. The groups, which are free to attend, run for two hours along similar lines to Ruch's relationship-based model for group reflection (Ruch 2007a & b, 2009). One case per session has been presented thus far, with discussion being informed by relationship-based practice, psychodynamic, and systemic perspectives. Future facilitators will be drawn from people who have come to groups and learn the process by experiencing it. The following [guidance](#) on the way groups run is available for those considering group membership:

One or two practitioners who attend will be asked to volunteer a brief account of a particular experience, difficulty or case situation they would like to discuss. The next step will involve exploring what factors are influencing the situation presented – what may be happening and why - and to consider the different perspectives and courses of action that may help to move the situation forward. These perspectives will include – among others - the importance of the relationships we create with different individuals, professionals and organisations. It will also focus on the additional understanding gained from a psychosocial and systemic perspective, with particular consideration given to the different emotions, feelings and defensive reactions that may be at play among the individuals involved. All

issues discussed will be bound by the strictest confidence in accordance with our professional ethics and values.

Two facilitators will support the group whose role will be to help practitioners to reflect and think about the particular case situation presented for discussion. This group is open to all social work practitioners and students. Our hope is that the exploration and thinking that is shared will be illuminating and stimulating, and also energising and fun. Given the demands placed on practitioners, regular monthly attendance is not required. We also see the group as a place where practitioners can take a rest from the pressures of the day.

Given the groups have just begun, no feedback from evaluation is available, and none is planned - in the short term anyway - given that attendance is voluntary and out of normal working hours.

Reclaiming Social Work – Morning Lane Associates

Morning Lane Associates (MLA) are a leading provider of systemic transformation programmes in children's social care. Their Social Work Unit model is based on systemic perspectives and social learning theory (Goodman and Trowler, 2012); the importance of assessing risk for children and young people is a key concept.

The accredited training Morning Lane Associates offer with the Institute of Family Therapy (IFT) is an adaptation of an earlier IFT course on working with couples and families, although some further changes to this are being considered. Organisations (and the units or pods within them) modelling a culture of openness was considered to be more important than training by itself. 'Groupthink' (Munro, 2008) and running too quickly to potential solutions are still issues within the model (and arguably all collaborative models), although unit visits help model a culture of openness with 'many heads' working together on hypothesis formulation e.g. on complex cases. A number of local authorities are apparently moving away from a case-based audit system. It will be interesting to see how this develops; there might be a role for rigorously facilitated reflective practice groups as part of a new, more engaging approach, to quality assurance.

In terms of MLA's reflective groups, five or six Consultant Social Workers, who lead the units or pods, usually come together approximately every six weeks for a two hour session where an issue is presented. However, their concerns tend to focus more on how the Unit is running rather than the cases held; this emphasis on personnel issues mirrors my own experience of running action learning sets with children's social care managers on other programmes. Once these issues are resolved, participants are able to re-focus on frontline practice and the cases their team is working with. The Morning Lane process runs along very similar lines to an action learning set with the presenter going away with concrete suggestions/actions to try out in practice.

In order to implement the model, the whole system needs to be supportive of it; an important point worth bearing in mind if the Centre for Social Work's intention is to introduce the selected reflective practice group model to local authorities in the medium to longer term.

Signs of Safety

The Signs of Safety (SoS) model, now applied worldwide after its initial introduction in Western Australia by Turnell and Edwards (1999), is being adopted by a number of local authorities in the

UK. This month Munro, Turnell & Murphy Child Protection Consulting¹ secured an Innovations Project grant of £4.7 million to work intensively with ten local authorities in England over the next 18 months.

This funding is to support full implementation of SoS practice in each local authority and help redesign local organisational procedures with each council to offer the most effective help to children, young people and families. The ten local authorities are: Brent, Bristol, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Tower Hamlets, Wakefield, West Sussex, and Wokingham. An action research evaluation is being led by Professor Eileen Munro.

A recent SoS newsletter outlined the key features of the project as follows:

- Core learning of the Signs of Safety practice for all ten authorities (basic training, advanced training and coaching for supervisors and other practice leaders)
- Comprehensive organisational reform to align the organisation to the Signs of Safety practice and documentation of the implementation work
- Specific reforms defining the practice using Signs of Safety in:
 - a single assessment for intake/first response,
 - the whole continuum of services from early help through children in need, child protection plans and looked after children,
 - family group conferences and child protection conferences,
 - public law outline,
 - integration with key partner agency services and Troubled families;
- Reforming managerial oversight and quality assurance with measures that are meaningful and easy to use for workers and managers
- Connecting Signs of Safety practice with the Ofsted (English Audit Commission) inspection framework
- Foundation research and development of open source information technology recording as well as the development of Signs of Safety apps
- Action research led by Eileen Munro informing the project as it proceeds
- Independent outcome research

Signs of Safety e-mail Newsletter, 20th October 2014

The SoS approach seeks to respond to a risk adverse child protection culture that creates poor quality relationships with clients and a conservative, overly controlling conservative approach (Parton, 2000; Turnell, 2004; Keddell, 2014). The model seeks to address how child

¹Munro, Turnell & Murphy Child Protection Consulting comprises Professor Eileen Munro, Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy, with associates Dame Moira Gibb and Viv Hogg (UK Regional Manager of Signs of Safety) as part of the team.

protection professionals can build partnerships with parents where there is suspected or substantiated child abuse or neglect. The approach combines elements of risk management within a relationship focused model (Turnell, 2012); it draws on humanistic, strength-based and solution-focused philosophies that stress the importance of establishing clients' perspectives on their own lives, and respecting them as 'people worth doing business with', (Turnell & Edwards, 1999, p.42). Its strengths-oriented approach seeks to avoid pathological or psychodynamic analyses of personal problems.

The model is based on solution-focused brief therapy (Berg, 1994; deShazer, 1984, 1985, 1988, 1991; Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974; Weakland and Jordan, 1990;) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1995; Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999). It is argued that the methodology offers much more than a process for looking at case practice: it is considered a powerful mechanism to engage frontline child protection practitioners in organisational development, and is also seen as a critical method of researching professional theory.

Without supplementary information from Signs of Safety on their application of reflective practice, it is unclear from the briefings (Government of Western Australia, 2011; Turnell, 2012) how group supervision or reflective practice groups operate within the model. Nevertheless, it is important that the Centre for Social Work Practice consider the market for the selected RPG model given that Signs of Safety has received such a strong endorsement from the Department for Education (2014) through its [Innovations scheme](#) now managed through the delivery partner, [Springboard Consortium](#).

Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) Reflective Practice Workshops – email correspondence October 2014, a proposal on the model and review report on implementation, both dated 2010.

These reflective practice workshops were started in 2010 by Liz Jones, a mentor on the South West Councils' Assessment, Planning, Intervention and Review Action Learning programme (Jones, 2011) and now Commissioner for Children's Specialist and Targeted Services in the council. The workshops were designed to supplement the essential and arguably individualised and somewhat linear approach taken to quality assuring all Review Child Protection Conference minutes and agency reports. The workshops were piloted within children's social care and then extended to other professionals through the LSCB after the first three had run successfully. The idea was to look in more depth at families where children sit just beneath the threshold based on practice themes emerging through the case file audits.

The workshops were held on a monthly basis between 12.00 and 2.00 with around 12-14 people. Hot drinks and biscuits were available, but participants brought their own lunch. Sessions were informally run with less emphasis on training and more on dialogue and shared learning. A series of thematic workshops were offered on topics including:

- The place of analysis in assessments and agency reports for Child Protection Conferences;

- Understanding the daily life experience of the child and the capacity of parents to change the child's experience for the better;
- Understanding and fostering emotional resilience in children who have suffered or are likely to suffer emotional harm;
- Working with parents who are assessed as being resistant to change. By way of example, questions raised under this theme very much related to relationship-based practice and key practice dilemmas:
 - How do we make change seems possible for parents whose life experience makes it challenging for them to see progress as a possibility?
 - How do we communicate what is needed when the change required is more about emotional attachment than concrete expectations around the physical and practical care of a child?
 - How do we manage our own professional pessimism with families where the concerns are chronic?

Each workshop started with a briefing paper on the theme, drawing on research and examples of effective evidence-based practice. Participants then discussed a 'live' anonymised case study in small mixed groups with questions to steer their reflections. In addition a chronology of significant events in the children's lives was usually provided to help participants get to grips with family history, patterns of behaviour and how concerns progressed. Issues were then discussed within the large group with the family's worker benefitting from the collective reflections and insights from the group as a whole. This feedback loop into direct practice, based on the small group's initial reflections and then within the whole group, was a key feature of the model. Key workers reported that the process gave them new insights into moving their case forward. Another interesting observation from key workers was that they appreciated the contributions from other professionals, such as health visitors and education colleagues; and that this would encourage them to conduct future case discussions with other agencies, with a new respect for their insights.

Although the cases were anonymised, respecting confidentiality was stressed throughout and all papers relating to the family were collected in at the end of each workshop and destroyed.

A wide range of professionals took part in the workshops with some teachers also expressing a strong interest in taking part, but it was felt that w/shops would need to be re-scheduled to facilitate their participation. Although there was no formal evaluation, informal feedback was that they were welcomed and well-received; over time offers of help also came from other professional groups to help run the workshops. Participants liked the two hour slot and thought it fitted in better with their work schedules than a full day's training.

Benefits included being able to step back and reflect on practice whilst listening to the perspectives of colleagues from different professional backgrounds; appreciating an in depth look at the lives of children in one family; exploring different ways of working with families to effect change; and using the space to supplement supervision where there is less time to reflect. Having

an opportunity to consider the emotional impact of the work was also a common theme. Several practitioners reported that they were taking the learning from the workshops directly into practice.

Action Learning

In Southend Borough Council, newly qualified social workers have had the opportunity to be part of an action learning set to take on real issues and learn from them through action and reflection. It was recognised that the changing complexity of social workers' caseloads required an approach which was supportive, challenging and requiring reflection on the problem, arguably difficult to achieve with supervision becoming more managerial and target driven and less reflective. Action Learning was pioneered by Reg Revans and has gained popularity amongst large corporate and public service sectors aiming to support organisational and personal development for managers and staff dealing with 'wicked problems' (Grint, 2005). Small groups (or sets) of 5 to 8 'partners in adversity' get together every six weeks or so and support each another with challenging and supporting questions, which is at the heart of the action learning methodology.

Although Revans never gave a one sentence definition of action learning, he did identify what it was not (Revans, 2011, p.77-93):

- Project work
- Case Studies
- Group Dynamics and task free exercises
- Business consultancy

Revans urged against the use of experts and expert facilitators in sets; instead a movement towards 'unknowingness' and to ask fresh and insightful questions as opposed to expert instruction from others. A number of models of practice can be used with small groups including the five step model, gossip method and constellations, each of which has its own merits to support learning about the problem (Pedler & Abbott, 2013). Crucial to action learning is the commitment from set members to take action on their issues and bring their results and outcomes back for reflection and learning. This aims to have two effects; to learn critically about the problem and what and how they managed to learn from it and secondly, for the group to understand themselves from others taking action. Pedler highlights that these processes of 'learning to learn' and learning about oneself are crucial for transfer of learning to other situations.

Abbott and Taylor (2013) argue that social work and other helping professions such as counselling are well aligned to the aims and underlying philosophy of action learning. Reclaiming power and notions of emancipation and critical reflection are arguably essential ingredients in supporting personal, team and organisational learning. Of course, action learning is not a panacea for solving the world's problems and challenges, conditions need to be right and the methodology tends to suit organisational and system problems. However, it is argued that individual learning and group learning occur as a product of being asked questions about what is not known about the problem, rather than what is known, and therefore opens the door to new opportunity and real action.

V. Evaluation

Fook and Gardner (2007) identify a lack of research on critical reflection: its meanings are diverse, on occasion nebulous and extremely difficult to research in more 'objective' ways (Moon, 2004). The literature search for this report also revealed a similar lack of applied research and evaluation in this area. Many different factors may be at play when evaluating whether a group has successfully met anticipated outcomes: the skill of the facilitator; the relevance of theoretical perspectives; previous experience of similar experiential learning groups; individual learning styles; educational levels of attainment by group members; how the group forms; the work/ learning context; support for the reflective group from senior management; collecting data from participants once the programme has ended; and locating them later, say after six months or a year, to evaluate the application of learning.

A key issue surrounds what we are evaluating and for whom. Clearly the focus in any evaluation and the relative merit of the findings will depend on perspective and the associated framework. Fook and Gardner (2007, p.128) usefully outline three main foci for evaluation:

- an evaluation of the effectiveness of or satisfaction with the actual teaching/ learning programme
- an evaluation of the actual learning/ changes involved for learners
- an evaluation of the application or use of this learning.

The first two of these are easier to achieve; the final focus requires returning after a period of time, when priorities might well have changed or participants moved on, to test whether anticipated programme outcomes have actually led to the intended practice improvements.

VI. Current Policy Context

Two main models of practice – Reclaiming Social Work (Morning Lane Associates) and Signs of Safety (Resolutions Consultancy) – are being strongly endorsed by the Department for Education along with the Frontline fast-track social work training programme, which is offered through a partnership comprising the University of Bedfordshire, Morning Lane Associates and the Institute of Family Therapy. In a [statement](#) on 24th October 2014, Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker, highlighted the crucial role played by consultant social workers. She also emphasised that nearly all local authorities who have achieved a 'good' rating in the new round of Ofsted inspections have a clear theoretical model. She urged local authorities to consider their 'practice framework'.

In a [speech](#) to the National Children and Adult Services Conference on 30th October 2014, Nicky Morgan, Education Secretary, announced the introduction of Approved Child and Family Practitioner status as an essential requirement for working in child protection, and a new role of Social Work Practice Leader, which "will complement the corporate leadership role of the director of children's services, allowing a wider pool of leadership talent to be considered for those roles while the rigorous focus on social work practice sits with the new practice leader". Within the proposed new assessment and accreditation system for children's social workers in England,

supervisors will also be assessed and accredited to shape 'practice excellence'. The standards for these the three levels- approved child and family practitioner, assessed and accredited supervisor, and practice leader - will be based on a new statement of the knowledge and skills for children's social work due to be published next month; Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker, will lead on this. A further year of funding was also announced for the fast-track Frontline programme.

The Education Secretary also highlighted children's mental health as a priority; the earlier appointment of DfE minister, Sam Gyimah, for CAMHS; the development with the Department for Health to establish a mental health taskforce to look at this area in more detail; and mental health guidance for schools with better linking across health, schools and social services.

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