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Work Discussion in English Nurseries

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Manuscripts

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Work Discussion in English Nurseries: Reflecting on their contribution so far and issues in developing their aims and processes; and the assessment of their impact in a climate of austerity and intense audit.

Abstract

In this paper, we argue for the past and continuing relevance of Work Discussion, as a model of professional reflection for nursery practitioners, which is attentive to emotional experience in work relationships.

The development of Work Discussion in English nurseries is described with illustrations, from a psychoanalytic perspective, of aspects of the processes of discussion and their underlying dynamics; and we also explore the introduction of Work Discussion to the training regimen of early years' teachers.

Finally, the paper summarises the key findings arising from an evaluation of Work Discussion sessions, with nursery practitioners working with vulnerable two-year olds, held at weekly intervals for a year, and facilitated jointly by early years' care and education specialists together with child psychotherapists.

Keywords: work discussion; training nursery practitioners; early years; morale.

Introduction

Nurseries are places of intense emotion. The capacity of young children to evoke powerful emotions in the adults who care for them is well understood and is an essential part of infant's emotional development. Such feelings include joy and satisfaction as well as anger, division and alienation. Nursery work can be exhausting, predictable only in its unpredictability: and, as Lovgren argues in relation to the Norwegian nursery system, practitioners:

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5 ... have the second-worst occupation for work-related health problems ... the
6 consequences of workers being emotionally exhausted (and eventually burned out)
7 include job withdrawal and lower productivity and effectiveness (Lovgren, 2016,
8 157).
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13 The wider questions here are how nursery practitioners manage their emotional
14 responses to their everyday work with young children, conceptualised as emotional
15 labour by Hochschild (1984). What can be done to understand this work better and
16 promote more widespread recognition of its value and exigencies?
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23 In Vienna at the First International Work Discussion (2016) we discussed the
24 exponential expansion of nursery provision during the past half century, and how
25 this phenomenon has coincided with, and is a direct response to, the transformation
26 of women's participation in the workplace.
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32 This paper builds upon the Vienna presentation that argued that the kinds of social
33 defences against anxiety evident in the cultures of day nurseries¹ of the 1960s and
34 1970s are still pertinent today. At that time, day nurseries prioritised admissions for
35 often disturbed and emotionally demanding children of families with considerable
36 social and emotional difficulties (documented by Alastair Bain and Lynn Barnett
37 (1986) and Juliet Hopkins (1988)).
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45 While nursery policy has changed considerably in the intervening period, it now also
46 operates in a climate of austerity and intensive audit. In collaboration with nursery
47 experts and child psychotherapists, and following in the footsteps of Bain and
48 Barnett and Hopkins, we have explored the implementation of different forms of
49 Work Discussion with nursery practitioners and teachers, whether in terms of
50 participation (whole practitioner teams from a single nursery or practitioners from
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56 ¹ We use the term 'day nurseries' here to represent the nurseries which Bain and Barnett and
57 Hopkins refer to and which were run by local authority social services departments, as distinct from
58 nursery schools, run by education departments or pre-schools run by the voluntary sector. Since
59 then, there has been much greater integration of provision although most provision now operates in
60 the private commercial sector.

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3 multiple nurseries), of presentation (written or verbal presentations), or of
4 frequency (weekly, two weekly and monthly intervals). In whatever form, our aim
5 has been to enhance nursery heads' and practitioners' management of the complex
6 emotional dynamics of nursery work; and thus, to encourage them to feel better
7 supported and more able to focus on nursery interactions.
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14 Margaret Rustin has referred to the product of the collaboration between early
15 years care and education specialists and child psychotherapists as 'the fertility of the
16 couple' (Rustin, unpublished contribution at the Second European Conference on
17 Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Educational Settings 'Relationships in
18 Schools: Contemporary Problems and Opportunities' Naples, 2008). By the time of
19 the Vienna conference, we had experience of different models of Work Discussion
20 groups in some 20 different English local authorities, which have been described in a
21 number of published academic papers and articles (Author, 2012; 2013; 2014;
22 Author and Dearnley, 2007).
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32 Since then, the Froebel Trust², an early education charity promoting the principles of
33 the German pioneer educator Friedrich Froebel, has funded two further evaluations
34 of Froebelian-connected Work Discussion. Froebel believed that gaining knowledge
35 depended upon reflection: and, in particular, upon reflections of 'man's' own
36 actions (Froebel, 1838, cited in Liebschner, 1992).
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43 The first evaluation funded by the Trust, adapted the Tavistock Observation Method
44 for use by nursery practitioners in two parallel projects in London and in Sydney,
45 respectively. Observing either in their own nursery, or visiting others, practitioners
46 then discussed their findings with the assistance of a child psychotherapist: in these
47 cases, Katy Dearnley in London; and Belinda Blecher in Sydney; and this work is
48 reported in separate publications relating to each project (Author 2017; Harrison
49 2017).
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² www.froebel.org.uk

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3 With a much larger grant to evaluate the impact of two Work Discussion groups, the
4 second project involved nursery practitioners working with vulnerable two-year
5 olds, and was held at weekly intervals for an academic year, facilitated by Author
6 and Katy Dearnley; and for managers of private nurseries operating in a highly
7 deprived area of London, held at two weekly intervals, also for an academic year,
8 and facilitated by Author and Ruth Seglow. Having completed the first evaluation,
9 we set out some principal findings later in this paper.
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20 **Nursery becoming a major feature of family life**

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23 The last four decades of the 20th century saw a rapid expansion in the participation
24 by mothers of young children in the paid labour market (Ben-Galim et al 2014) and a
25 corresponding increase in nursery provision to provide care and education in cases
26 where both parents were working. A consequent commercial nursery market (Penn
27 2007; 2018) catering for babies and young children for up to 10 hours each day and
28 open throughout school term and holiday periods to match full time working hours
29 and limited annual leave (Author and Page, 2015) dwarfed the old model of local
30 authority or voluntary sector nurseries and pre-schools offering early care and
31 education for three and four-year olds for 15 or 20 hours a week. To put this
32 phenomenon into some sort of perspective, the UK early years and education
33 inspection agency, Ofsted, reports that there are some 30,000 nurseries (double the
34 number of registered primary schools) in England and Wales (Ofsted, 2015).
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47 This expansion in nursery provision, in terms of prevalence and hours of availability,
48 has given rise to much debate about the emotional impact on young children, and,
49 especially, on babies, of extensive extra-familial care (Karen, 1994).
50 Notwithstanding, the original simplistic and widely-asked question about whether
51 nursery is harmful for young children is now more nuanced in enquiring how young
52 children fare in different kinds of nursery environment (Narvaez et al 2013).
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The need for Work Discussion in English nurseries

Readers of this Journal will be familiar, from two earlier papers which it has published, and from which we quote (selectively), as follows:

The nursery staff, Maria and Ana...were very worried about Lara, a nine-month-old infant, looked after by them between 11am and 6pm, who slept for long periods during the morning. Maria, who was initially very upset and angry, believed the staff group in the morning shift did not share the same approach as the group in the afternoon...Maria felt that this disturbed Lara in such a way that she preferred to isolate herself and sleep (Cardenal 2011, 247).

...we were obliged, repeatedly, to witness the experience of how hard and disturbing it is, to be confronted so intimately with the...often catastrophic emotions of very young children.... From this point of view, the caregivers' indifferent and reserved behaviour can be understood as an expression of their desire to protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed... (Datler et al. 2010, 82)

It may seem self-evident that nursery practitioners need to talk to each other about their work experiences with children. However, there are powerful processes that influence the relationship between workers and the children they care for. These can impinge upon the relationship so that sustained contact is not maintained and direct the institutional focus elsewhere. Certainly, although the primary task of nurseries has not altered, the conditions within which the UK public sector services operate have changed significantly.

Work Discussion as a model of "professional reflection" is distinctive in that it attends to emotional experience at work, including the influence of unconscious anxiety. Menzies Lyth, in consultation with Alastair Bain and Lynn Barnett, first drew attention to the impact of anxiety in nurseries resulting in what they described as patterns of 'multiple indiscriminate care'. (Bain and Barnett 1986, 14.) Their phrase, 'multiple indiscriminate care' meant patterns of interaction between staff

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3 and children which were very brief and where any practitioner might undertake any
4 task for any child; there was very little continuity of attention.
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9 Juliet Hopkins, showed the sources of anxiety which gave rise to 'multiple
10 indiscriminate care' included,
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14 concern that if attachments were allowed in nursery, they would be weakened at
15 home; that parents would resent practitioners allowing the children to become
16 attached; that the inevitable separations would be very painful for practitioners if
17 they did allow attachments when children then had to move on from nursery; and
18 That practitioners would develop preferences for one child over another and that
19 the best way to be 'fair' was to limit interaction with all children (Hopkins, 1988).
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26 Menzies Lyth conceptualised the organisational behaviours that these anxieties gave
27 rise to 'social defence systems'. In a symposium in Oxford organised by David
28 Armstrong and Michael Rustin, the question was raised about whether the concept
29 of 'social defence systems' was still relevant in contemporary organisations,
30 including nurseries, some 50 years after Menzies Lyth first introduced the idea
31 (Armstrong and Rustin, 2014).
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39 Significantly, nurseries are very different now, in that those that Menzies Lyth
40 studied admitted *only* children with severe social and behavioural difficulties. By
41 contrast, today's nurseries take children because they live locally, rather than purely
42 on the grounds of social need. Further, standards and regulation are stronger and
43 much greater emphasis in policy is placed on the importance of the quality of
44 attachments for children.
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51 While nursery practice is much improved, there is, nevertheless, evidence of the
52 continued existence of conscious and unconscious anxiety which affects practice.
53 Nursery practitioners continue to be fearful of parents' resentment at their child's
54 attachment to a nursery practitioner and, as parents are now 'customers' in a
55 market of nursery provision where competition is acute, their feelings matter much
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3 more. Nursery staff are also very anxious about child protection so that physical
4 contact with children is seen as potentially 'dangerous' and to require very close
5 supervision. They are also highly concerned about any negative criticism if they
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7 allow a child to become attached to them. For example, if shift patterns or annual
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9 leave, mean that their lack of availability leaves a distressed child with their
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11 colleagues (Elfer, 2014).
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16 So there appears to be a continuing need for Work Discussion in nurseries in 2018.
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18 There are also many issues of process and organisation that require attention to
19
20 make Work Discussion 'work' in busy, hard-pressed nurseries.
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24 **The impact of austerity and audit**

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27 In their book, *Borderline Welfare*, Cooper and Lousada. (2005) explore the UK's
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29 move to a more audit-based culture and away from professional autonomy. The UK
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31 public sector's organizational focus has been increasingly concerned with planning,
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33 meeting timescales, completing paperwork and a relentless demand for improved
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35 outputs, rather than with workers experiences. Services are qualitatively thinner
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37 and more procedural, as performance management regimes have moved into the
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39 space once occupied by professional autonomy and discretion, all in the name of
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41 efficiency. As a result organisations are appreciatively more risk averse as
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43 inspections and audit proliferate at the cost apparently of sustained human contact
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45 and this appears to be particularly true in our nurseries.
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48 The UK Office for Standards in Education, Ofsted, inspects and determines how
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50 nurseries are rated in terms of quality; their reports can be business-sensitive,
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52 sometimes leading nurseries to close. Consequently, Ofsted can be regarded as a
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54 punitive master which has to be fed all the right paperwork and seems to be
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56 relatively uninterested in the quality of adult-child relationships. Nursery
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58 practitioners are worried about their survival and so they favour activity and having
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3 a positive stance even in the face of real anxiety and distress rather than talking
4 about their experiences and concerns.
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9 This is illustrated by an extract from the notes of our Work Discussion. On one
10 occasion, when a group was describing their participation in Work Discussion,
11 someone said that they were “too old to sit still”. This comment may refer to the
12 need to be active as a primitive response to avoid difficult or painful experiences, or
13 it may be a response to personal discomfort with different and, perhaps, new ideas
14 in the group. Another worker told us that “short-ish cuddles” were fine, but not
15 ones that lasted for twenty minutes. It transpired that cuddles were not really
16 viewed as work by her nursery.
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25 Both these sentiments raise a further, interesting, question about the value of a
26 quiet space that allows the possibility for something new, touching or disturbing to
27 emerge. The sheer level of activity in nurseries can affect practitioners’ capacity to
28 notice and think about the children to such an extent that we have sometimes
29 concluded that workers are psychologically held together by action rather than
30 thought.
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38 An unintended consequence of this type of organizational culture is that UK
39 government policy, which was designed to promote adult-child interaction, seems
40 to have been turned on its head. For example, “Observation” in the UK early years
41 system, should be an opportunity for the worker to take in a child and his or her
42 preoccupations. However, we have heard more than once how a worker will
43 interrupt play to capture the “observation” on paper to comply with the written
44 requirements needed for the nursery and its regulators.
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52 Nursery workers must be mindful of managerial requirements designed to meet the
53 expectations of Ofsted. Providing documented evidence of young children’s
54 progress in learning and behaviour, often geared towards ‘school readiness’, is
55 important and a key concern for many parents. However, the emphasis placed on
56 this compared to the limited attention given to children’s internal emotional states,
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3 is arguably a form of defensive activity. Consequently, practitioners cannot be fully
4 immersed in being with the children and thus sustained contact is avoided.
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9 This organisational culture is combined with other aspects that are particular to
10 nurseries: namely that the emotional lives of infants and young children are raw and
11 primitive, and they evoke powerful feelings in adults. It is these feelings that infants
12 need adults first to contain and second to help the infants make sense of. This is
13 emotionally exhausting work; and if difficult and painful emotional states can be
14 avoided, then they will be. However, if workers do not think about their feelings, it is
15 difficult to think about how children will learn.
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23 Bion's theory of containment (Bion, 1962) describes this relationship-based process
24 between infant and caretaker which can either enhance the capacity to tolerate
25 painful and frightening emotional states or inhibit or exaggerate them. In good-
26 enough circumstances the container (i.e. the adult) changes the nature of the
27 contained (i.e. the emotional states of the infant) and returns it in a more
28 manageable form.
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36 However, what happens in the following example? A little girl was persistently
37 furious with her mother for leaving her at nursery and immediately took against her
38 key worker, who found the rejection difficult to tolerate. This little girl probably
39 needed someone to be furious with, someone who could be alongside her with this
40 experience without reacting. To do this, the practitioner needed to feel secure
41 within herself and to be in an organisational culture that would not judge or act
42 prematurely.
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51 In this instance, the nursery changed the girl 's key worker but the question remains
52 as to what the child understood by the events. One imagines that her fury and
53 hostility were very difficult for the worker to bear and not to take personally, which
54 might have left her to manage by herself. So, one might consider that the
55 organisational culture itself was un-containing, pushing the unmodified fury and
56 hostility back into the child. Perhaps if practitioners were encouraged to think more
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3 about emotional states, then they could tolerate such experiences more easily. In
4 this case, had the key person understood the little girl 's need to hate, and not felt
5 that she was doing something badly, then perhaps it could be tolerated more easily.
6 It is precisely these sorts of organisational struggles that highlight the central need
7 in nurseries for a non-judgemental space where close attention can be paid to the
8 experience of working with infants.
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16 Work Discussion seminars aim to create a reflective space for practitioners to think
17 about their experiences, the nature of their role, and the organisational task, within
18 a group setting that considers all aspects of the work presented. For this, the
19 seminar needs to move at a slower pace and to examine the material in detail,
20 complete with its ambiguities and painful contradictions. In this way, the group can
21 develop a culture of curiosity and openness and a capacity to accept members' own
22 uncertainty. Thus, practitioners are able to sharpen their perceptions through close
23 attention to detail and discussion of their own and others' thoughts. In this way the
24 door opens into a different understanding, which may help group members to make
25 different and new connections. Being able to stand back and gain a perspective on
26 what happens in the workplace will enrich the group's participants and their work as
27 they widen their general understanding.
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40 As Juliet Hopkins concluded exactly 40 years ago:

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43 However, good training and on-going support can only be effective if
44 individual case assignment and adequate staff/child ratios make rewarding
45 attachments between nurses and infants possible. If all these conditions are
46 provided, nurses should not need to retreat behind impersonal institutional
47 defences in order to cope with their sense of frustration and failure (Menzies
48 1982); they should be able to provide the opportunities for intimate
49 attachments which infants need (Hopkins, 1988, 210).
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58 Our primary expectation was that Work Discussion groups would provide this '*on-*
59 *going*' support and thus assist practitioners to reflect on, and process, their own
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3 feelings, allowing them to be more thoughtful about themselves and the children in
4 their care. Nursery practitioners might then be more empathic to children's conflicts
5 and losses, and so be readier to engage in emotionally close relationships rather
6 than distancing themselves from painful experiences.
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12 An example of how professional reflection translates into action became evident
13 during a Work Discussion group for nursery managers. One of the managers
14 reported that she had started to go into the nursery rooms without a specific errand
15 or task just to sit and notice what happened. Her practitioner's responses to this
16 phenomenon soon changed from initial suspicion and curiosity, to acceptance and
17 interest. The manager went on to relay how she usually dreaded returning from
18 annual leave because she would feel overwhelmed by the copious notes of
19 problems and issues from the staff, waiting for her, stuffed through a crack in her
20 locked drawer. Recently, however, her staff had taken to holding on to their
21 preoccupations until the afternoon of her return and handed them over personally
22 with explanations. The manager linked her staff's thoughtfulness with her own
23 increased availability and appreciated that her team of practitioners allowed her to
24 settle back into work first. This did seem to be a reciprocal gesture: and in this
25 demonstratable way, the manager and practitioners had provided some
26 containment for each other. Thinking about emotional states requires space and
27 time; and it is evident that institutional changes, such as those in this nursery, are
28 needed to support practitioners in their complex primary task of understanding
29 infants' and children's communication.
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47 **Work Discussion in the training of early years' teachers**

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49 Important development work has been done with the use of Work Discussion with
50 groups of teachers in school contexts (Jackson, 2008). Whilst early years teachers
51 working in nurseries face very different challenges to their colleagues working in the
52 statutory school age system, we need to better understand the contribution of Work
53 Discussion to the training of early years teachers.
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3 Trainees embarking on an early years' teacher-training programme work or are
4 given a placement with babies and young children under five in nurseries from
5 across the diverse early years' sector described earlier. The professional status
6 awarded for this training enables these teachers to lead practice in private,
7 voluntary and independent sector nursery provision. However, the 'status' of this
8 specialist early years role is not currently recognised as equal to Qualified Teacher
9 Status and remains a fragile and controversial government initiative (Osgood et al.,
10 2017).
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20 For the first group of trainees, small group supervision seminars with three groups
21 of up to ten students were established on each weekly training day, facilitated by a
22 member of the core training team. The aim was to provide a safe, reflective space
23 for students to explore issues and celebrate achievements arising from their
24 teaching and leadership roles at work or on placement. Delivering supervision in
25 groups during training provided a model of how it could be applied in practice. This
26 came about partly in response to the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)
27 statutory requirement for all nursery practitioners to receive opportunities to reflect
28 on their practice (UK Department of Education (DoE) 2017, Section 3.21); and partly
29 because there was very little guidance on how such opportunities could be offered.
30 Previous models of reflection and "journaling" resulted in trainees thinking more
31 about their own experiences rather than drawing upon those of others to broaden
32 their perspective. Engaging in group reflection, therefore, seemed to be an
33 appropriate way to meet the programme learning outcomes for reflective practice.
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49 This fledgling attempt to facilitate group reflection gave rise to a number of
50 challenges. The facilitators were also responsible for overseeing the observation and
51 assessment of the trainees' teaching practice and of offering additional one-to-one
52 tutorial support. The trainees' expectations for focused individual attention seemed
53 to militate against establishing group time, making it difficult for the facilitators to
54 hold on to their vision of shared group reflection. Instead, there was increasing
55 pressure from trainees to use the time to talk about the complexities of the training
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3 programme or to be given more time for individual tutorials. These demands
4 became more persistent and seemed to surface constantly in the content of
5 practice-based discussions.
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9 Hatice talked about how she had encouraged a child to prepare himself for an
10 activity he wasn't keen on by talking him through what was going to happen.
11 This led to several practical suggestions from the others, such as providing a
12 choices board or having visual prompts. Justina added examples of what she
13 had done to help her own children and talked at length about her 6-year old's
14 need to be prepared step by step for everything she was expected to do. Flor
15 followed this with an example of her own 5-year old child's constant
16 questioning about what was going to happen next, pointedly referring back to
17 the reassurance I had tried to provide earlier about making sense of the
18 training programme, by saying that feeling reassured wasn't easy for everyone.'
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29 There seemed to be a tension between the creation of a reflective space where it
30 would be possible for the trainee teachers to engage with the emotional aspects of
31 their practice, and the pull towards compliance with its regulatory focus. The
32 spectre of Ofsted was ever-present both for the students in their nurseries and in
33 respect of the training team's accountability for the quality of the training. Attempts
34 to hold the boundaries and develop a group reflective space were frequently
35 frustrated, and the students demonstrated their resistance through lateness,
36 absence or forgetting to prepare an example to share in the group.
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47 Following an end of year review, the training team decided to introduce a more
48 formal group reflection structure for the new cohort of trainees. We incorporated a
49 work discussion component into group supervision with a specific assignment
50 structured around the process of their personal and professional learning arising
51 from their discussions. This clearer strategy and rationale for the group sessions,
52 with specific guidance for students designated to bring a written description to
53 present to the group, meant that Work Discussion seminars became a more formal
54 part of the training programme. In addition, the use of assessment to set clear
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3 expectations and boundaries for the sessions were helpful for the training team and
4 provided the trainees with a clear understanding of what was expected of them
5 from the outset.
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11 We split the larger training group into three Work Discussion groups running in
12 parallel and, inevitably, each facilitator's approach and relationship with the group
13 varied slightly. Therefore, it was important for the facilitators to be aware of the
14 different ways the groups behaved, particularly concerning students'
15 competitiveness with each other and their perceptions of what happened in the
16 groups of which they were not members. Remaining in touch with the group's
17 processes as a lone group facilitator required constant vigilance and reflection
18 before, during and after each seminar. Although the facilitators shared their
19 experiences of the group sessions and provided support for each other, they still
20 found themselves vulnerable, particularly in terms of managing unconscious group
21 behaviour and then of making sense of this afterwards.
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35 For facilitators whose teaching role normally involves delivering a lecture or devising
36 seminar content, this approach to working with groups is very different. In Work
37 Discussion, the content emerges during the seminar and cannot be pre-planned by
38 the teacher/facilitator, which means both that the discussion has to be considered
39 and managed as it evolves; and also that experience is needed to develop these
40 skills. One further surprise was that a successful approach with one group of
41 students did not necessarily work in the same way, or even particularly well, with
42 others.
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53 As the training programme progressed, the participants began to appreciate how
54 the weekly Work Discussion seminars empowered them to trust in their own
55 professionalism and more confidently share their view points in team meetings and
56 wider professional contexts. Their feedback increasingly focused on how helpful it
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3 was to share their stories with others and that this helped them to develop a greater
4 capacity to make sense of their experiences. For example:
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7 For me it was...I had a sort of a light bulb moment the first time we talked
8 about it because it was something that bothered me, made me a bit
9 uncomfortable and I started talking about it in our Work Discussion... and then
10 as I was talking, as I was just saying it out loud, more things kind of were
11 coming out and I was thinking, "Oh, the whole thing bothered me, there was so
12 much! "As I talked about it more, and people asked questions, it kind of
13 clarified what was bothering me... But I think that the process of talking about
14 it helped me see that it wasn't just that one little thing it was actually a broader
15 issue that I wanted to try and work with, so yes, it was definitely helpful for me.
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26 **Does Work Discussion Work?**

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28 For the use of Work Discussion to become widespread, we realise that we need to
29 provide evidence of its particular value and contribution. This is especially relevant
30 since there is now the statutory requirement, mentioned above, that providers put
31 in place appropriate professional reflection/ supervision arrangements for nursery
32 staff. Ofsted has not been prescriptive about how to do this. We referred earlier in
33 this paper to two evaluations of Work Discussion, both funded by the Froebel Trust.
34 The larger of these Work Discussion sessions involved two groups of nursery staff:
35 one of practitioners working together with two-year olds in a single nursery; and the
36 other of managers of a small group of independent nurseries.
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47 The Work Discussion sessions held with the practitioners at weekly intervals during
48 the academic year of 2017, were evaluated by a team of researchers working
49 independently of the session facilitators. Their evaluation focussed on the progress
50 of the children cared for by the practitioners during that year. Some of these
51 children were presented and discussed at sessions and some were not: but all
52 children were included in the evaluation. The Work Discussion participants were
53 also interviewed at intervals throughout the year, to ascertain their views and
54 feelings about the process. The methodology of such an evaluation – discussed
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3 elsewhere (Author et al. (2018)) – is complex; it is always difficult, in such a
4 sophisticated social and cultural context as a nursery, to demonstrate causal
5 relations. The findings, however, briefly described here, were strongly positive.
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7 While children are expected to make good progress over the course of an academic
8 year, judged by the Department of Education’s own assessment tool, the extent of
9 the progress of the two-year olds cared for by the practitioners’ team participating
10 in the Work Discussion, was considerably greater than would normally be expected.
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18 Most of the children made significant progress over the course of the study.
19 Although approximately one third (7) of children made age-appropriate gains of 7-8
20 months, twice that number (14) showed gains ranging between 15 and 26 months.
21 The strength of the qualitative and quantitative data (admittedly in a small sample)
22 lends confidence to our conclusion that Work Discussion may have had a beneficial
23 effect on children’s behaviour and mental development. Even though there were no
24 significant variances in the progress of different groups of children, it is worth
25 mentioning the exceptional gains made by two of the initially lowest-attaining
26 children. This reinforces our opinion that further research could usefully explore the
27 possible differential effect of practitioner participation in Work Discussion for such
28 children.
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40 The shift in experience and attitude to the Work Discussion group sessions by the
41 nine participants during the year was also striking. Before the start of the group
42 sessions in January 2017, practitioners mostly expressed negative expectations
43 about the time commitment, the length of the sessions, and having to stay at work
44 late (although they were compensated for this additional time by being able to finish
45 work earlier on a different day each week.).
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52 The practitioners found the content of the Work Discussion groups important, often
53 saying that they enjoyed the meetings, thought the facilitators asked interesting,
54 thought-provoking questions and valued the facilitators’ expressions of admiration
55 for their work. About a third of the participants expected more from the facilitators
56 in the form of advice and with less focus on exploration of presented issues, which
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3 they sometimes found uncomfortable. Most, however, said that their experience of
4 the groups was generally comfortable: and three spoke of how these groups allowed
5 them to open-up emotionally; see more clearly things that they already knew; and
6 deal better with their feelings so that they could focus on their work more
7 effectively.
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14 All the participants thought the Work Discussion groups had benefitted their work
15 with children and families. Perceptions of the identified benefits varied but included
16 practitioners being less judgemental; more understanding; better able to empathise;
17 readier to share information within the team; and thinking more deeply and more
18 objectively about the children. Eight practitioners also said that the Work Discussion
19 groups provided a catalyst for changes in their practice, trying a different approach
20 with a child or acting on issues more quickly, in the knowledge that there would be a
21 supported opportunity to reflect on it. The major identified drawback of the Work
22 Discussion groups was the time commitment involved; and we could see that it was
23 sometimes exhausting, at the end of a hard day in the nursery, to sit for a further 75
24 minutes reflecting on their interactions.
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40 **Organising and facilitating Work Discussion groups**

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43 While the results of our work with different groups of qualified early years
44 practitioners and teachers, and those in training, are encouraging in
45 themselves, we recognise that Work Discussion in early years care and
46 education work needs to be developed and expanded further. In addition, it is
47 important to consider other factors such as cost; whether to recommend it
48 compulsory or voluntary attendance, and about how to train Work Discussion
49 facilitators.
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The English nursery market is a sharply competitive one (Penn 2018), with heavy downward pressure on fees to keep places competitive for parents and

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3 maintain profit margins. Much of the case for early years provision itself has
4 been made on the basis of cost-benefit return analysis of spending public
5 money on early childhood services. This is based on the idea of a financial
6 premium to the economy in later years of a better skilled work force and the
7 avoidance of the social costs associated with a failure to address
8 developmental problems in young children early on (Moss and Petrie 2002).
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10 Therefore, any commercial nursery provider will examine all cost elements in
11 their own nursery enterprises also in terms of cost-benefits and rates of
12 return, including any potential investment in Work Discussion or any other
13 model of professional reflection, in terms of its potential for a financial return.
14 This may well be demonstrable in terms of greater parental (customer)
15 satisfaction ratings and improved staff retention and progression. Are these
16 the grounds though on which to justify Work Discussion in nursery policy?
17 What about the human value, for both young children, family members and
18 nursery practitioners, to have opportunities to think about the processes and
19 different meanings of their day to day working relationships together bringing
20 up the next generation?
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34 Although we welcome the EYFS requirement for practitioners to have
35 opportunities for professional reflection, it does not necessarily follow that
36 Work Discussion would be adopted in nurseries, in order to meet this
37 statutory provision. It might be argued that all professional practitioners
38 working with the young children of families should be prepared to take part in
39 serious, critical group-reflection on their day to day work. It is our view that
40 making attendance compulsory might be counterproductive in terms of having
41 a space for genuine professional reflection; and, for this reason, we argue
42 that voluntary participation is preferable. Similarly, we recognise that
43 preparing written presentations for Work Discussion sessions takes time
44 which needs to be explicitly allocated: some practitioners might be anxious
45 about committing a problematic situation to writing, especially if these are to
46 be seen by senior managers.
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57 Our experience showed that the collaboration in which Child
58 Psychotherapists facilitated Work Discussion for early years' care and
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3 education proved effective in this research project. However, the involvement
4 of Child Psychotherapists could prove too expensive and impractical at a time
5 when budgets for professional development have been systematically
6 reduced. Nevertheless, many early years' trainers have experience in
7 working with groups and may be interested in a bespoke training programme.
8 Principally, this would need to address the understanding of unconscious, as
9 well as conscious, processes in individuals and groups; and be built into the
10 wider offer of Work Discussion to nursery practitioners as a mainstream part
11 of national early years policy implementation.
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22 **Concluding Remarks**

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24 The competing pressures of a government requirement to provide adequate
25 supervision for practitioners in early years' environments, and those of
26 financial austerity and Government audit priorities for nurseries, are
27 challenging. In this paper, we have demonstrated the importance of
28 structured group supervision through providing Work Discussion groups, but
29 these were separately funded through a research grant which paid for weekly
30 groups in one London nursery.
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37 Extensive evaluation has produced generally positive results that encourage
38 us to promote this comprehensive form of group professional reflection as an
39 optimal way of meeting the statutory requirement for reflective practice for
40 nursery practitioners. If the cost and logistical challenges create a barrier to
41 providing Work Discussion as an effective opportunity for reflective practice in
42 early years' services, there is a strong case for prescriptive public policy, and,
43 or targeted funding, to create the necessary impetus necessary for offering it
44 across the UK.
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