

Group-based reflective practice in sport psychology: Experiences of two trainee sport and exercise scientists

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Reflective practice is becoming increasingly recognised as a tool used to enhance the development and effectiveness of sport psychology practitioners. It has recently become an established feature within UK-based training and accreditation programmes for sport psychology practitioners and it was the personal benefit found by the authors of group-based reflections within their own training experiences that stimulated this reflection. This exploratory paper provides the personal accounts of two trainee sport and exercise scientists. The narratives outline the perceived importance of using group-based reflective practice to develop applied practitioner skills. These, in concert with literature from other fields, resulted in the development of a model for successful group-based reflective practice that outlines the conditions and skills that are proposed to be important for such practice as a tool for learning.

Keywords: Group-based reflections; reflective practice.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE is being increasingly recognised as an important process within the broader canvas of applied sport psychology (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). Indeed, recent changes to the training routes of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) and of the British Psychological Society (BPS) emphasise the role of reflective practice throughout the training process and within supervision (Knowles, Katz & Gilbourne, 2012). Literature supports the use of reflective practice (e.g. Anderson, Knowles & Gilbourne, 2004; Cropley et al., 2010) as part of practitioner development in applied sport psychology as it can allow practitioners the opportunity to examine their own practice taking into consideration their thoughts, feelings and actions (Cropley et al., 2007). Telfer and Knowles (2009) suggest journals, reflective conversations with a critical friend, taped narrative, and discussion forums in groups as formats for capturing reflection, and these techniques can often be found within training activities for the trainee sport and exercise scientist or sport psychologist.

Currently, much of the reflective practice in sport psychology literature focuses on individual reflections (e.g. Cropley et al., 2007; Woodcock, Richards & Mugford, 2008), with benefits to the practitioner suggested to include being able to make sense of, and learn from, practice, helping to explore and inform decision-making, helping to increase understanding, ensuring accountability, self-management and, ultimately, improving effectiveness (Anderson et al., 2004). Furthermore, it has been suggested that reflecting on practice can empower individuals to implement change, become more self-aware (Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998) and generate practice-based knowledge (Cropley et al., 2010). Indeed, in Cropley et al. (2007) the lead author examined his own practice through the use of self-reflection, concluding that it increased self-awareness, self-confidence, creativity and helped to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. However, he also found that reflection often created more questions than answers which, for an individual trainee, could actually cause more problems

than solutions. Although supervision could be considered the main support mechanism to reduce the likelihood of such problems occurring it is also possible that group-based reflections may also offer further support.

Group-based reflective practice

Group-based reflective practice appears to be more commonly used in other practitioner domains and training environments, including health and education, than in sport psychology. For example, Branch et al. (1991) and Branch (2010) provide accounts of the experiences of a group of trainees engaged in group-based reflective practice within the education of trainee doctors. In these accounts compulsory small-group learning activities (including topics such as listening to patients, interviewing skills and reflection on interviews) were instigated within a first-year patient-doctor course (Branch et al., 1991). Specific effects included students learning to be more supportive, to give more honest and specific feedback to each other and to resolve disagreements and learn from each other's experiences. Reflection on collective experiences allowed individuals to become more compassionate towards patients and students became more self-aware, with experiential learning (e.g. role playing) leading to closer working relationships. Furthermore, students reported interviewing exercises and tutorial discussions as effective learning experiences, yet it was suggested that the small-group process was the major vehicle for learning in this context.

As a result of these groups, and due to the success of the programme, a third-year patient-doctor course was created, where students were brought back into their original groups and focused on their clinical experiences (specifically around communication, medical mistakes, ethical issues and critical incident narratives; Branch, 2010). Small groups using semi-structured sessions (e.g. suggested format, educational goals, case examples and associated reading to discuss) ensured experiential and self-

directed learning. Critical group reflection was a central element within both courses, which was longitudinally allied with transformative effects on learners, 'promoting the emotional, moral and professional growth of the medical students' (Branch, 2010, p.329). Additionally, critical reflection increased cohesion, supportiveness and provided an opportunity to reflect on disturbing events within the peer support groups.

Within nursing education, action learning groups (ALGs), have been used as a mechanism for facilitating reflections through the sharing of experiences, peer experiential learning and group support. Haddock (1997) reflected on her experiences in an ALG from an undergraduate perspective, specifically focusing on her involvement in a group of 10 to 12 student nurses, which was facilitated by a lecturer. The author reported that the ALG provided a sense of commonality and unity, challenged personal values, and improved self-awareness. However, when reflecting upon her experiences two interdependent issues were highlighted; anxiety and safety. As anxiety levels increased, it was reported that the author felt increasingly unsafe to self-disclose and participate. The structure of the group, the facilitator style and group development were identified as factors that could affect the level of anxiety experienced. More specifically, anxiety was apparent when the group did not have any structure, the facilitator (supervisor) took a 'back seat' and there was a lack of cohesiveness or supportiveness between members. However, when the group had more structure, the facilitator was more of a role model, and the group was more supportive and reflective, anxieties decreased and safety and loyalty increased. This reflective account highlights the need for careful consideration and a clear structure when offering opportunities to share views and experiences.

Reflective practice has also been found to be important within the education of trainee teachers (Griffiths, 2000). De Ville (2010) interviewed 17 teachers and 11 lecturers

regarding their reflective practice experiences during training, and the impact of these experiences on their current professional practice. This research found that connectedness and supportive collaboration, as evidenced through high levels of pastoral care, strong congruence of worldviews and subject interests, and engagement in meaningful dialogue, were important factors in the development of reflective practitioners. De Ville (2010) reported that having something in common (e.g. subject discipline or experience) increased connectedness between members, which resulted in increased reflective practice development. This is further supported by Wilson, Rozelle and Mikeska (2011) who reported that teachers who collaborated over time were better placed to gain support from colleagues experiencing the same issues.

Based on the evidence from medical education, nursing and teaching, it could be suggested that group-based reflective practice might also benefit trainees within sport psychology. For example, a more formalised approach within the current development routes could provide support between trainees, more opportunity for feedback and communication with others. In turn, this could provide increased learning experiences, and an opportunity to constructively challenge values and beliefs within a safe environment, thus enhancing individual self-awareness. Additionally, with the provision of guidance (e.g. Knowles & Saxton, 2010) further professional development could be achieved. However, aside from the 'suggestion' of such benefit (Knowles et al., 2007), no research currently exists that actually demonstrates the benefits of group-based reflective practice within sport psychology-training, nor the development of such groups. The closest example of such guidance implemented in practice can be observed in Poczwardowski and Lauer's (2006) account of the Redondo Beach Think Tank. For this, a group of experienced veteran and young trainee sport psychology consultants met collaboratively over two days

to discuss and learn from each other's experiences in order to 'share important lessons' from the field. Ground rules were established to ensure the environment was conducive, effective and beneficial for all. Several anecdotal reflections by way of autoethnography described the entire event and associated processes, in the hope that similar events and networks would be established elsewhere. Although it was not explicitly termed as such, the sharing of experiences and the consequent lessons learned actually demonstrated how reflective practice could take place in a group-based setting, and how formal networks could be implemented into existing pre-award curricula for the benefit of trainee/future practitioners. Several years on, this is a practice that has seemingly not yet emerged within the applied sport psychology as perhaps it was hoped following the publication of the paper. Therefore, the aim of the present paper was to: (a) provide an overview of the activities of a group set up to support and develop trainee practitioners specifically using group-based reflective practice; and (b) provide a reflection on the group activities and environment from two of the group's members.

Our group

The group in question originally formed as a result of our supervisor taking on trainees for BASES Supervised Experience, with a focus on sport psychology. At the beginning, the group consisted of the two authors (trainees) and our supervisor, creating a firm foundation for two other group members to join within the following six months. The meetings were held monthly at the university at which our supervisor was based. Typically the 'day' would start with lunch involving all group members which allowed an informal catch up and additional group bonding. This set the scene for the afternoon's more formal training sessions. The content of the sessions was organised and semi-structured by our supervisor and each session started with shared reflections of current applied

work, research and/or any issues experienced. In each session we were encouraged to share learning experiences through the use of case study examples, providing brief summaries of events attended and share articles that had been found to be of particular interest. Although one of the trainees had been working in an applied role for a number of years on an ad hoc, voluntary basis, overall the trainees came to the process on an equal footing. This made the development of group 'rules' straightforward and this itself was a shared venture. Early in the group formation, the (BASES) Code of Conduct was frequently discussed, along with ethical considerations, which naturally resulted in their application to the group environment we found ourselves in. Confidentiality was something that was paramount to the group, and was discussed in detail. Additionally, within our initial meeting, we discussed other group expectations, including honesty, positivity, provision of feedback to others, and the sharing of ideas and resources. Our supervisor requested that anything shared within the group remained this way (unless consent from respective individuals was granted).

Of the group activities, it was the concept of 'shared' or 'group-based' reflections that has had a more significant impact on the two authors than their individual input alone. Central to the reflective process has been the dynamic of the working alliance that developed between the authors, and how this became influential to the support mechanisms that have aided subsequent individual practitioner development. Although created with the common purpose of successfully completing the two to six year SE process, it took some time for the group to become a true learning community (cf. Wenger, 1998). We had the benefit of individuals' with backgrounds in education (teacher training), sport and exercise science (lecturing and applied practice) and counselling (solution-focused approach), who shared common experiences as trainee practitioners. In this sense the group was homogenous and

shared the same characteristics that a researcher would seek in 'focus group' participants to create an open, directed environment, but one that embraces diversity to improve the depth and richness of discussion.

Each group member came to the process with different levels of experience of reflective practice. For two members it was an already established practice but for others it was a newer experience. Although this could be viewed as a limiting factor, it was perceived that the smaller, more intimate group that formed allowed us to 'understand and accept the importance of being able to reflect in safety knowing others respect the confidentiality of the process' (Telfer & Knowles, 2009, p.44). In addition, deeper relationships formed and members felt safe early in the process. The cohesive nature of the small group provided the opportunity and time for quality relationships to develop and a depth to group-based reflections to emerge that we feel would not have been achieved if the quantity or number of shared experiences increased. Although it could be argued that quality was more important than quantity in this situation, it is important to be mindful of individuals who might feel some anxiety about sharing within a more intimate setting, and the support mechanisms that might be required to facilitate their development.

Cropley et al. (2010) raised concerns that development programmes where there is 'little guidance or instruction' might result in the 'likelihood that reflective practice becomes something to 'be done' to fulfil accreditation requirements rather than a mechanism of practice' (pp.523–524). In contrast, we experienced an environment that promoted support for peers and an opportunity to learn from the experiences of others. There was active encouragement from our supervisor to reflect on our recent experiences. Our supervisor shared her own reflections with us and we started every SE meeting with a group-based reflection on a current client and we were encouraged to give feed-

back to one another. It was important for our group that the reflective practice that was encouraged within our meetings became not only thinking about what we do (Ghaye, 2009) but an important part of our learning journey that needed to be clearly structured. As such, in addition to applied practice, there were often reflections on other areas. This has included the process of SE (for example, SE Annual Report requirements and journal articles of interest), work-life balance (cf. Waumsley, Hemmings & Payne, 2010) and the future directions of both sport psychology applied practice and sport psychology in further/higher education.

Reflections of lead author (Emma)

When embarking on supervised experience, I initially shared the view that reflective practice was a 'tick box' exercise and did not fully understand the importance of the process to my future development as a practitioner. Within my first year of training, I also felt episodes of anxiety leading up to and during supervisory group meetings, which stemmed around my perceived lack of knowledge, having no experience of working with clients, fear of participating in role play activities and feeling incompetent in front of both my peers and supervisor. After several meetings, the group members began to form close relationships and realised we had more in common than we may have first realised. Experiences could be shared with one another within what became a safe environment through the implementation of ground rules (e.g. ensuring confidentiality, respect, constructive criticism, tolerance of mistakes; Ghaye, 2005; Poczwadowski & Lauer, 2006) and reflective practice was used as a tool to learn from these experiences. It was only then that I was able to see the value of reflective practice for my development, and learn from the anxieties felt initially about practice. Additionally, action plans in moving forward were devised, both as the member sharing the experience first hand and those reflecting on secondary experiences.

One particular experience that was shared with our group was an ethical dilemma I was faced with whilst working with a team at an international competition. The situation related to a 15-year-old female athlete who was discovered one evening, after a report from another female squad member, in the hotel room of an adult male coach from another international squad. The situation raised several ethical issues that, as a trainee, I believed I was unable to cope with, including safeguarding and child protection. However, reflecting on the situation post-event which took place immediately after in a solitary environment and again when writing an official report for the international governing body, I concluded that I did all I could have done upon hearing about the incident and the actions that followed. The main reflections were centred around future actions and how I could have prevented the situation happening in the first place. Questions arose such as 'Was it my fault as the person providing sport psychology support?' 'Should we have provided tighter boundaries?' 'Was this a coaching issue?' 'Should the athlete's parents have been there?'

On my return from the competition, I reflected on the situation once again with my supervisor, who confirmed my actions as being appropriate, and we further discussed how a similar situation could be avoided in future, through critical reflection and seeking future change. Additionally, it was agreed that, as with many situations faced in applied sport psychology practice, it was unlike any 'typical' situation in an academic textbook or professional practice article and therefore would be beneficial to share and reflect upon this with my peers so that further learning could be achieved. The sharing of this experience and group reflection not only allowed me to provide the group with real-life material with which to learn from, but I also felt a sense of relief and satisfaction in sharing the experience with them, as the astonishment they displayed (and verbalised) demonstrated

that they too would not have expected to face that situation at an international event as a trainee.

Reflections of second author (Nichola)

Knowles and Telfer (2009) stated that reflection is the engagement in an active learning process. Reflective practice doesn't just happen, we have to participate and invest time in reflection in order to benefit from its true value. From my recent experiences of lecturing in teacher education, it has become apparent that 'learning' reflective practice (developing an individual model) begins with a trainee teacher needing to be disciplined and allocating time to reflect. This might be to complete a required assignment, for example. Over time, trainees have reflected on their practice within my taught sessions and they now work through their developed structure automatically as they leave the classroom. One trainee shared that she no longer 'carries' the experiences she had in lesson one into lesson two, where previously she would have still had the emotions and often negativity (from poor behaviour for example) at the start of the next lesson.

Seeing others develop their reflective practice strategies has been an incredibly interesting learning experience for me. Coming to the SE process after 10 years of teaching rather than immediately after my MSc, as originally planned, has allowed me to reflect on my own development very differently. Although an experienced reflector on my own teaching practice (even during my own PGCE I kept a reflective diary and was encouraged to write full reflections on observed lessons), I was surprised that although my individual 'framework' for reflective practice was established, it was a strangely uncomfortable feeling being a trainee once again.

The SE group environment almost mirrored my own PGCE class group and the staffroom environment where I would 'shelter' after my lessons as a trainee teacher. Second time around, in my supervised experience,

I was able to see that my reflections became less raw, emotionally, when reflecting in the shared setting. Having firstly individually reflected I would then almost re-reflect prior to the SE meetings (or speaking to my supervisor) in order to add clarity and meaning to my thoughts and explanations.

In addition to this second layer of reflection, I gained a considerable amount from seeing and hearing others respond to my dialogue. The reflections within this current group compared to my PGCE colleagues were mature and grounded in life experience. Each group member would offer suggestions and share their own experiences with the support and critical eye of our supervisor cementing the process. Of particular importance to my development was hearing the reflections of Emma (co-author). Not only did I benefit from my own 'show and tell' but I found I learnt a significant amount from listening to and understanding her experiences and how she reflected on them. This related strongly to the findings of Poczwardowski and Lauer (2006) who noted that the 'young group' in the Redondo Beach think tank reported excitement, enthusiasm and a rejuvenation of spirits from working with the other young professionals. When working together and reflecting, I would feel invigorated and motivated to improve my own practice and initiate self-challenge.

One of our SE activities, led by Emma, was completing the Johari Window exercise (see Shambrook, 2009). The group was led through this exercise to develop our levels of self-awareness as individuals (and practitioners) and to allow us to see how we were perceived within our group. This self-practice was beneficial on three levels. The first was a clear increase in my own self-awareness; the gaining of feedback from the SE peers enabled me to be more aware of myself as a trainee practitioner as well as a person. The second was the impact this activity had on my ability to reflect. I was significantly more honest with myself and reflected far more deeply about my input and approach

in addition to the decision making and challenges I set myself. The third benefit was that this was an activity that I would use with athletes, in particular a current team I was working with. By experiencing the activities and their benefits myself as an individual, as a practitioner I had a more thorough understanding of the tools and as a consequence I was able to administer them with more confidence.

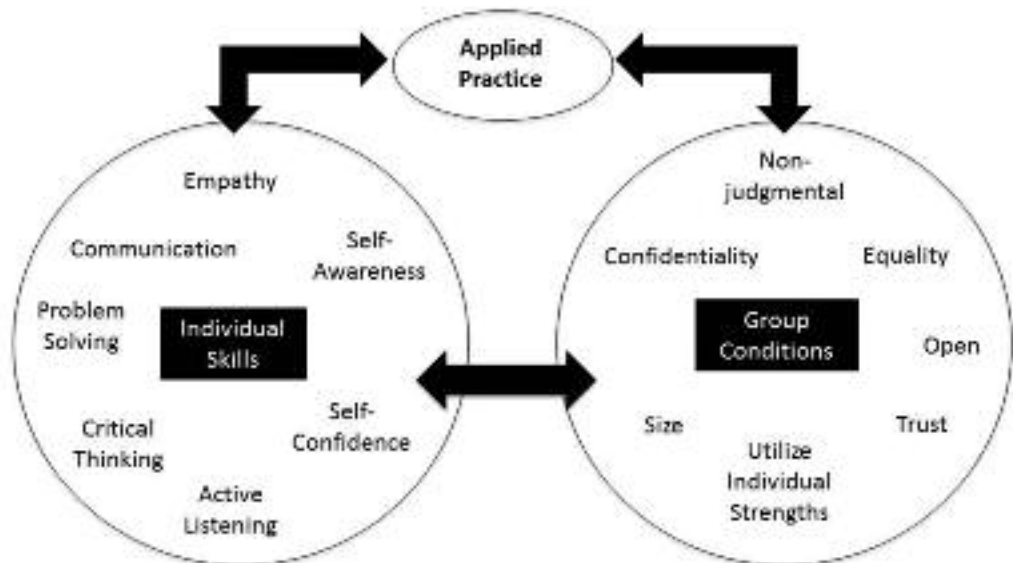
A model for successful group-based reflection

At present, there are notably few systems in place to support the neophyte practitioner develop their ability to reflect (Cropley, 2009). Moreover, there is currently no guidance or framework on how group-based reflection should be utilised within practitioner development of trainee or established applied sport psychologists. Following discussions within our group it was decided that we would like to share our experiences, in particular the reflective practice structure that had developed, with a view to gaining feedback on our ideas and also to hear the

experiences of others. It became apparent early on in the process that there were a number of components, from both an individual and a group perspective that needed to be placed in definable areas, and so a model started to take shape. In short, the model (Figure 1) is designed to elaborate on the required attributes (individual) and conditions (group) for a successful group-based reflective practice process with a hope to start the ball rolling to formalise what we experienced as an essential part of our professional development.

We have received some valuable feedback to date on the proposed model. One suggestion pertaining specifically to the individual skills aspect was that 'critical thinking' (the questioning of assumptions and seeking errors), should replace 'lateral thinking' (more associated with the movement value of statements and ideas). This supports the work of Knowles and Gilbourne (2010), who talk about a concept of critical reflection as referring to the type of reflection that promotes the possibility of change. Critical reflection, associated with critical thinking

Figure 1: Group-based reflective practice model.



and problem solving (Cropley & Hanton, 2011), is suggested to promote individual practitioner development within the supportive framework of peers.

Holt and Streat (2001) acknowledged that reflection requires highly developed skills of analysis, evaluation and appropriate time set aside to complete it comprehensively. Self-awareness of one's own skills is therefore crucial to fulfil this process. Additionally, although 'supervision offers an appropriate space for reflection' (Katz & Hemmings, 2009, p.21), it is recognised that the presence of 'others' could influence the dynamic and, therefore, nature of reflective practice within a group, therefore, making the individual skill of self-awareness important. Therefore, 'active listening' within a group environment is also paramount, to ensure that individuals hear the reflections of others whilst simultaneously understanding, which allows individuals to empathise ('empathy') with one another when sharing ('communication') reflections. Finally, each individual continued to develop and demonstrate increased self-confidence (and more specifically self-efficacy; Bandura, 1997) through vicarious experiences (akin to stages and levels of reflection; Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010), verbal persuasion (through supervisor/peer encouragement) and modelling (through seeing/hearing about peer successes and learning from their mistakes).

Considerations were also made to the criteria by which we would structure our reflections, as observed in Martindale and Collins (2005), who called for a 'criteria against which we are to reflect' (p.311). From a reflection perspective, both authors of the current paper had initially been drawn to Gibbs (1988) model of reflection as the 'feelings' aspect had been of significance during the reflective process. However, when considering a professional practice 'structure' or 'criteria', it was felt that the framework presented by the BASES guidelines were deemed sufficient at this point of our development. For example, for the BASES

SE a trainee will submit an annual report that evidences how they are working towards a number of competencies (e.g. communication). This framework provided a structure, each competency, to reflect on. Nevertheless, we do believe that this could be an area for further investigation, with input from more established and seasoned practitioners.

The group conditions proposed are based solely on our own experiences and it should be noted here that 'ground rules' (e.g. see Ghaye, 2005) were established from the outset that addressed potential concerns that we would produce more socially desirable reflections (Cropley et al., 2010) when reflecting in the group setting. Furthermore, we were encouraged to be 'open' and 'non-judgmental' in the knowledge that the environment was 'confidential' (adhering to the BASES Code of Conduct) and that we had 'trust' among the group. As Tod (2011) states, 'trainees may be comforted to learn most practitioners experience anxiety when first helping athletes' and that they may 'benefit from exploring their anxieties rather than trying to reduce them' (p.17). Sharing our concerns and fears within the group, accompanied by our supervisor reflecting on her own practice, allowed us all to feel equal ('equality') within the group, with no one person having all the answers. Our supervisor emphasised that all practitioners can make mistakes or indeed be unsure of how to move forward with an issue and that these 'hurdles' can often provide a useful learning opportunity and thus should not be taken as a setback (Holt & Streat, 2001). This strengthened the purpose of the shared reflections which were at times accompanied with feelings of discomfort and vulnerability. The small size of the group allowed for cohesion and also allowed us to feel that we could contribute equally and, more importantly, feel heard and valued.

Of greatest importance to the group was the idea of 'utilise individual strengths'. Coming from different backgrounds we not only felt that our contributions were valued

but that we all felt we could add something unique to the discussions. We were encouraged to present to the group on the areas that we felt we could bring new knowledge to and this allowed for learning and further deepening of respect among members. When examining our professional development it was crucial that we were mindful that by working under one supervisor it was essential for us each to establish ourselves as individuals. Referring to education literature and the use of the 'mentor', Bailey and Schoch (2010) discuss the trainee teacher developing independence as a result of the mentor relationship highlighting the need for autonomy within practice. In sport related support, while the supervisor can facilitate growth and offer insight into practice (Watson, Lubker & Van Raalte, 2011), it is important that trainee practitioners develop their own ways of working and don't become a 'mini-me' of their supervisor (Woodcock et al., 2008). Thus, there is potentially a need to have access to a number of practitioners of differing levels of experience for successful group reflection.

Our supervisory group, however, only had access to one expert (our supervisor), which could be viewed as limiting our opportunity to develop as practitioners. This was in contrast to Branch (2010), who ensured several 'experts' facilitated each of the group sessions outlined within their research. This is supported by Knowles et al. (2007) who advocate the use of group sessions with supervisors and peers and implies that access to more than one supervisor could be advantageous in the reflective process. A more collaborative approach therefore, could provide a potential opportunity for supervisors working in isolation to allow their trainees access to additional learning opportunities.

Concluding thoughts...

In this paper, we acknowledge the need for a structure for reflection, in particular, within a group-based setting, which addresses the concerns of Cropley et al. (2011) who stated, 'reflecting alone can be limited by our own knowledge' (p.17). At present there are opportunities for a supervisor (or supervisors) and/or colleagues to offer guidance through shared reflection thus providing a second opinion, shared knowledge, or confirmation, which helps to develop effective practice. However, this process is not currently formalised within the existing framework for training and continuing professional development of applied practitioners in sport. Therefore, in concluding this paper, we feel that there is scope to explore group-based reflective practice in more depth, in order to establish implications for future practice.

We have continued to offer support to each other within our professional practice and are both now BASES Accredited following a successful three-year SE period. Additionally, we are also committed to continue group-based reflective practice as we develop further as practitioners as what was started during our training and SE will be continued via peer support within our careers. Although it is acknowledged that supervision usually requires there to be a more experienced practitioner, the concept of peer supervision/mentoring cannot be without its merits as an alternative support network. The lack of guidance and framework reported by Cropley (2009) provides an opportunity for future research to examine suitable structures to be applied to the neophyte practitioner and beyond.

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