Title:

Reflective practice groups in a children's social work setting – what are the outcomes, how do they 'work' and under what circumstances? A new theoretical model based on empirical findings.

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Abstract

Despite widespread acceptance of the importance of reflection and reflective practice groups (RPGs) in children's social work, almost no evidence exists as to the outcomes of RPGs in this context. This is a serious limitation because such evidence is crucial for funders and policy-makers and to establish RPGs as evidence-based practice. There is also an absence of theoretical models to inform thinking about how RPGs might 'work' as an intervention to support workers and improve practice.

Contributing new evidence to bridge these gaps, this paper reports a mixed-methods, longitudinal evaluation of RPGs within one local authority children's social work services department. The study advances the methods that have been used to investigate RPGs in the social work context and considers outcomes beyond that of the individual practitioner. The paper also presents a new theoretical model, based on these empirical findings, of how RPGs 'worked' and under what circumstances.

Introduction

In Autumn 2015, one local authority children's social work services department in the South of England implemented monthly reflective practice groups (RPGs) for frontline and managerial staff across the service. The RPGs took a 'whole system approach' , which is closely aligned to that of Work Discussion and Balint Groups. RPGs were instigated to support and embed the move to a new model of relationship-based practice (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010) that was taking place across the service. Other aims were to support staff, improve practice and ultimately ameliorate outcomes for children and families. The local authority commissioned the Centre for Social Work Practice (CfSWP) to provide external facilitation for RPGs and to support the development of a number of internal facilitators with a view to embedding a sustainable longer term capacity for reflective practice.

This paper reports the findings from a mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation of this 'whole system' reflective practice group model. These empirical findings make an important contribution to the field of children's social work, where previously, despite widespread acknowledgement of their importance, there has been no clear evidence of the effectiveness of RPGs (Ixer,1999; Wilkins, 2017). The very few previous studies in the social work context have used in-depth qualitative approaches rather than investigating quantitative outcomes. This study plugs that gap and in combining quantitative and qualitative data moves RPGs into the realms of evidence-based practice.

There is also an increasing drive for evaluations to become theory-driven (Pawson & Tilly,
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2007) asking not only if complex interventions work, but also how and under what circumstances. This is important to understand whether interventions are suitable for a variety of contexts and the likely determinants of success (or failure). Whilst theory has been used to shape the approach to delivering reflection and RPGs (which is discussed further in the literature review below), there have been no previous attempts to theorize the mechanisms via which RPGs might work as an 'intervention' to support front line staff and improve practice, or to consider the circumstances under which positive outcomes might be achieved. In contexts of increasing pressure on services and stress and burnout amongst staff, this is a timely endeavour. Based on our findings, we present a new theoretical model of outcomes that have resulted from RPGs (at a variety of levels) in this setting, the mechanisms/processes by which these were achieved and the facilitating contextual factors. We believe this is relevant for social work managers and educators seeking to implement RPGs in their own settings and for those making funding and policy decisions. It could also act as a basis on which to build further research and evaluation.

Literature review

The term reflective practice group (RPG) can be used to describe a range of models whereby practitioners come together to reflect on practice and engage in learning, practice development, and mutual support. Jones (2014) identified a number of models of RPG in use within social work. These included: Critical Reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007), Online Critical Reflection Dialogue Groups (Baikie, Campbell, Thornhil & Butler, 2013), Relationship-based model of

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reflection (Ruch, 2007), and Work Discussion (Rustin, 2008). This plethora of approaches has led some commentators to suggest that there is no generally understood definition of reflective practice (e.g. Wilkins, 2017).

However, when we consider the underpinning theoretical assumptions to the approaches outlined above (and any omitted from the list), we can define common roots that are helpful in situating certain approaches together. The Critical Reflection and Online Reflection approaches, for example, are influenced by the work of Schön (1983) and the importance of surfacing tacit assumptions that influence practice (Jones, 2014). The Work Discussion and Relationship-based models of reflection, on the other hand, are based on an approach to practice, stemming from the Tavistock Clinic that highlight the importance of processing the strong emotions that arise in caring work if workers are to remain fully engaged and emotionally healthy (Menzies Lyth, 1960).

A key influence in this theoretical approach to RPGs is that of the Work Discussion Group (WDG). WDGs are founded on the work of Martha Harris and Wilfred Bion, who developed Bick's approach to infant observation to facilitate the observation of the dynamics occurring in human interactions within work situations. Rustin (2008) describes the task of WDGs as the

'..application of psychoanalytic ideas and methods to the emotional and unconscious life of individual workers and the organisational settings of work with children and families' (p.267). WDGs examine the anxieties and defences arising from the work of safeguarding vulnerable

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In the WDG model, a group of approximately six members meets together regularly with a trained facilitator. One member begins by describing in detail a situation that has been bothering them. These accounts are often prepared in advance, but may be delivered 'off the cuff' depending on the preferences of the group (Jackson, 2005). The presenter talks for approximately 15 minutes. The remaining group is then invited to discuss the presentation, giving their own reflections, without posing direct questions to the presenter, who listens but does not join in at this point. After a period of approximately 15-20 minutes the presenter re-joins the conversation. In the remaining discussion, the presenter can comment on what they have heard and share any further thoughts that have emerged. Part of the facilitator's role, along with maintaining the structure/process, is to draw attention to possible underlying emotions and areas that may have been avoided in the discussions (Elfer, 2012). Drawing on the collective knowledge, insights and experiences of the group is a key part of this approach. The groups 'facilitate an extension in the worker's frame of reference and understanding, so that interventions can be based on a fuller appreciation of the emotional factors at work in relationships.' Jackson (2005,p.6).

The approach of the Balint Group (BG) is closely linked with WDGs. BGs were established by Michael Balint for GPs to help them to work with the difficult emotions that can arise in interactions with patients. Distinctions between the two approaches are Balint's absence of

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written preparation, uni-professional group composition and greater use of interpretation of the worker's experiences (Rustin, 2008). As well as being used in practice, WDG and BG are a core part of many clinical and applied training programmes. In some countries BG participation is compulsory for trainee doctors and as part of psychiatry training in the UK.

In terms of evidence of effectiveness of these approaches, the largest body of relevant literature is found in relation to BGs in the medical setting. In a recent literature review Van Roy, Vanheule and Inslegers (2015) described the relevant literature as scare, diverse and often methodologically weak, making it difficult to draw clear implications as to the precise benefits of BGs. In a number of studies, the benefits of Balint (including psychosocial benefits, improvement in self-efficacy and reduction in burnout) manifested over the long term, leading the authors to suggest that BGs should be run over at least one year to eighteen months to allow for change. They concluded that whilst BGs have 'value', more 'solid and systematic' research is needed to provide further insight into this. They highlighted the difficulty, and importance, of getting to the 'core' of BG work and defining and selecting appropriate (outcome) variables. Van Roy, Vanheule and Inslegers (2015) suggest that more well designed and well described qualitative studies are likely to be important as they allow for a more explorative approach.

Outside medicine, the literature is less developed. A small amount of material exists in relation to WDGs in educational settings including secondary schools (Jackson, 2005, 2008), early years' provision (Elfer, 2012) and special needs educational settings (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015). Here findings have been encouraging and shown improvements in participants' feelings of support,

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wellbeing and ability to cope with difficult situations at work (Jackson, 2005). Jackson (2008) also defines a list of features that are important to the successful running of groups including timing/duration, location, non-compulsory attendance, negotiation of ground rules and discussions about confidentiality. He suggests that barriers include the risks associated with investment of finances and staff time, potential for groups to be used as an opportunity to complain, and anxieties about being exposed.

There has been very little previous evaluation of RPGs or WDG in the social work context. The small number of studies that exist have used in-depth qualitative approaches (Canham, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2019). No previous research on RPGs in social work has looked at any form of outcomes for children and families.

The 'Whole System' RPG project

RPGs began in the local authority in November 2015 and continue to date. In the first year of operation, five externally facilitated RPGs and nineteen internally facilitated groups were in operation, each running on a monthly basis for seventy-five minutes (2 hours for lead practitioners), adhering to the whole system RPG model described below:

Closely linked to the WDG and BG, the whole system approach employed in the study setting has a number of distinguishing features (Herd, 2018):

- It is a 'whole system' model, underpinned by psychodynamic systems thinking (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). The aim is for all frontline and managerial staff to attend on a regular

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basis.

- Staff are allocated to groups containing others on the same hierarchical level from across the service. Thus, groups may contain a mixture of workers from short term, leaving care, fostering and adoption teams etc.

- Each RPG has 10 to 12 members and a facilitator. There are two types of facilitator, external facilitators and internal facilitators.

- External facilitators are highly qualified, experienced practitioners with therapeutic understanding and experience (here, managed and supervised by CfSWP). External facilitators provide the facilitation of Senior Manager and Team Manager groups as well as a consultant/lead practitioner group type group, who will become internal facilitators of RPGs for front line practitioners. This could be described as a 'trickle down' approach to facilitation whereby internal facilitators learn the model and facilitation skills through engagement in their own RPG and via contact with an expert external facilitator.

In the second year of operation a number of small changes to the model and its operation were instigated, the most major of these being the employment of two new external facilitators by CfSWP when the original facilitator's contract ended. There was also an increase in number of manager groups running as the 'offer' was extended to more staff at this level.

Evaluation aims and approach

The overall aims of the evaluation were:

- To investigate the processes by which RPGs were run and implemented within the organisation

- To identify facilitating and detracting factors

- To identify the outcomes of RPGs across the life span of the project for individual participants, the organisation and service users.

As such the evaluation approach combined *process* evaluation with *outcomes* evaluation (Daykin & Joss, 2016). The *process* evaluation resulted in considerable learning about the RPG model in operation and led to a number of changes over the course of the project. These findings will be published separately. The focus of this paper is on reporting the *outcomes* of RPGs for participants, the organisation and children and families. Some consideration is also given to facilitators and detractors of success.

An evaluation timeline is shown below:

Table 1: Evaluation timeline

At the end of the first year of RPGs, the project's original evaluator left and a second evaluator/researcher came into post. This unfortunately meant that, for a number of reasons, we have been unable to include data collected at the baseline stage in this analysis. This is a limiting factor, nevertheless, the subsequent two data collection points of +1 and +3 years have provided the opportunity to investigate the effects of RPGs over a number of years.

Methods

A mixed methods evaluation approach was employed.

Survey: Quantitative data were collected via an online questionnaire (via Survey Monkey) at +1 year, repeated at +3 years. The survey included a mix of closed and open questions, a number of which focused on gathering self-reported outcomes of RPGs. The survey link was emailed to all practitioners involved with RPGs. At +1 year, 47 surveys were returned (response rate of 22%). At + 3 years, 75 questionnaires were returned (response rate 32%).

Indicator data: At +3 years we collected organisationally held indicator data informed by the +1 year process evaluation, facilitated by the Principal Social Worker and data processing team. We collected Workforce data, Staff survey scores and numbers of children subject to a child protection plan, numbers of referrals and re-referrals per month and numbers of looked after children (all data between 2015-18).

Qualitative data: At +1 years, fifteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with RPG participants in a range of job roles. Three focus group discussions were conducted (two with managers and one with social workers). These allowed for engagement with a wider spread of practitioners and focused on a reduced set of questions. At +3 years, seven semi-structured telephone interviews with key informants were conducted. This included one member of Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with an overseeing role for the project and the two external facilitators, as well as four 'non-attending' social workers, recruited as the issue of attendance emerged as

important. These were identified/initially invited to take part by internal facilitators. Those who expressed an interest emailed or telephoned the researcher and interview appointments were arranged at this point. Two focus group discussions were held (one for managers and one for internal facilitators).

Interviews and focus groups lasted between 45-60 minutes and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Interviews and focus groups were sampled purposively to be as representative as possible within the context of small scale funding.

Analysis

At both rounds, basic analysis of survey data was conducted using the 'analyze' function in Survey Monkey. Numeric data was exported into Excel to create data charts and tabulations. Responses to open questions were also imported into Excel and coded to group responses into broader themes.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data was stored and managed through the use of NVivo 11. Transcripts were read in detail and coded, with codes being re-named, re-grouped, merged or disregarded, as analysis progressed. Coding was primarily inductive.

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the University of Winchester's Faculty of Education, Health and Social Care. An information sheet was circulated within the local authority. Consent was sought

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at the start of each form of data collection.

Findings

Survey

The survey used at +1 and +3 years, contained a number of questions which required respondents to rate their agreement with sets of statements regarding outcomes from the RPG project. The first set of statements broadly related to development of professional skills and support, the second related to self efficacy and the third to relationships. These statements were derived from findings from baseline data collection, the existing literature and the project aims.

The mean agreement with professional skills/support outcomes statements at +1 year and +3 years are shown in figure 1. To calculate the mean scores each level of agreement is accorded a value. Agree strongly = 4, Agree=3, Disagree=2 and Strongly Disagree=1. The nearer the score to 4, the higher the overall level of agreement. A score of 2.5 indicates the mid point between Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree, indicating a neutral response. At +1 year, the 'most agreed' with outcomes were

- The RPG has further developed my ability to reflect on my work

- The RPG has provided other perspectives concerning my work

- The RPG has helped me to manage the emotional impact of my work

Most statements were more agreed than disagreed with, but this was not the case for the two statements

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- The RPG has increased my knowledge about different types of interventions to make with families

- The RPG has improved my skills in relationship based work with families (which was the lowest scoring statement).

At +3 years, agreement with all statements improved and two statements 'The RPG has helped me to develop better understanding of complex problems in my cases' and 'The RPG has helped me to manage the emotional strain of my work more easily' improved significantly (at the 95% confidence level). All statements were more agreed than disagreed with, including the 2 statements for which this was not true at the previous round.

Figure 1 'Professional' outcomes

Level of agreement to self efficacy outcomes statements at +1 years and +3 years are shown in figure 2. Improvements from +1 to +3 years are seen across all self efficacy outcome statements, although not at the significant level. All but one statement (I always manage to find time to update and write case reports) are now more agreed than disagreed with, but it is arguable that RPGs are likely to have a limited influence on this aspect of practice.

Figure 2: 'Self efficacy' outcomes

Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with four statements concerning the effects of RPGs on relationships (with pod/team managers; between peers; with senior managers and across the system). At +1 year the only statement that was agreed with related to an improvement in interactions with peers. At +3 years, all four statements are more agreed with than disagreed with and the increase in agreement with all four statements is significant at a 95% confidence level. This suggests that at this point in the project, RPGs and the Relationship-based model of practice have embedded to such an extent that relationships are improving across the system.

Figure 3: 'Relationships' outcomes

Agreement with each barrage of outcome statements were also broken down according to job role. At both timepoints, when broken down by job, role senior managers and lead practitioners (internal facilitators) tended to agreed most strongly with outcome statements across all three categories. This suggests lead practitioners and senior managers benefited particularly from

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RPGs.

Qualiative findings

Qualitative findings provide a form of triangulation to those from the survey. At +1 year

outcomes reported by participants fell into 3 (positive) outcomes which were *emotional support*

and reassurance; better sense of organisation as a whole and *enhanced capacity for reflection*

and thoughtful practice. A negative outcome reported at +1 year related to *negative group*

experience.

Emotional support and reassurance

This theme resonates with the high level of agreement to the survey outcome statement 'the RPG

has helped me to manage the emotional impact/strain of the work' at +1 year. Participants spoke

about feeling reassured and supported by attendance at RPGs, stating that the process gave them

a sense of shared experience with their peers.

> As a member of a group it's helped me when things have felt difficult to feel that…
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> there's other people that feel things are difficult as well and actually are willing to
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> support me with that and share that. *Interview 11, senior manager.*

Better sense of the organisation as a whole

This theme resonated with the survey statement 'the RPG has strengthened my professional

identity' which was the forth most agreed with at +1 year (and scored more highly at +3 years).

Respondents felt more part of a whole organisation as a result of meeting with colleagues from

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across the service in RPGs. This could break down siloed views, enhance pride in the work and provide more understanding of the challenges faced by other teams.

> There's a kind of solidarity about how we do that together…so that coming together and sharing to do that I thought was really beneficial. And, it kind of enhanced, I guess my pride in the work that I do and we do really. *Interview 10, senior social worker*

Enhanced capacity for reflection and thoughtful practice

At +1 year, there were encouraging messages about participants taking more thoughtful action with families as a result of having time to reflect on their cases within RPG. The following vignette resonates with the indication from survey findings that participants perceive a benefit for their service users of participating in a reflective forum.

> I heard about a completely different outcome for a relinquished baby. Worker had not wanted to contact dad. After discussion at RGP child ended up in his care…Don't underestimate the role of the RPG... Allowed worker to explore avenues, be open to considering what she wasn't comfortable with, didn't feel judged, made for a more manageable piece of work and supported a good outcome for the child. *Participant, Focus group 2*

Negative group experience

Nevertheless, participants did not always experience RPGs as positive. Issues that detracted from group experience were poor attendance (which could result in frustration and limit the forming of

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trust); a lack of disposition to reflect in some group members (which might be due to individual disposition or contextual factors such as overload) and varying quality of facilitation which was seen to be due to the 'trickle down' approach to training facilitators. It is worth flagging here that the role of internal facilitator, which in the main was undertaken by newly appointed senior practitioners (who did not necessarily have previous experience of group facilitation), was a rewarding but challenging one during the first year, as shown in this quote from the +1 year evaluation:

> …challenging, is the word!...It is about trying to get people to, everybody, into a reflective space so because some people are naturally less reflective than others, um so and sometimes if those are more dominant members of the group in any case, it's really hard then to steer the conversation into a more reflective space because they're more dominant ….Other times it works really well. *Interview 6*, *Internal facilitator*

It was recognised in +1 year evaluation that there were some limitations to the 'training' that internal supervisors received, which were addressed as the project progressed.

At +3 years, two of the issues related to negative group experience identified at +1 year were felt to have been addressed, i.e. varying quality of facilitation and a lack of disposition to reflect. At +3 years, a change of external facilitators, further embedding of the model, enhanced 'training' and growing confidence in internal facilitators were felt to have contributed to improvements both in facilitators' experiences of being in their own RPGs and their own delivery of

facilitation. This is likely to at least partly explain the improved scores in the +3 year survey.

> One of the key learnings from the first phase of evaluation was about the struggle to get to that deeper level of reflection, and for the groups not just to either quickly jump into solutions or fixes or just to be opportunities for people to collectively share some of their gripes and worries. Certainly, in terms of facilitating a group and being part of the group that I facilitate, I think we've been able to do that much more and that's, I think, because I feel much more confident taking that role on. That's obviously modelling from experiencing it from (new external facilitator). I have changed how I facilitate that group because of experiencing (that) facilitation… *Interview 1, Internal facilitator*

Whilst qualitative findings suggest that facilitation and group experience/disposition to reflect has improved at +3 years, attendance continued to be an issue. A small number of interviews with 'non attending' social workers highlighted reasons of time pressures and emotional overload relating to busy, pressurised senior social workers. More encouragingly, a number of non-attenders described that they felt comfortable in accessing support and reflection within their own pods where they had established good and trusting relationships with their colleagues. The issue of poor attendance will be discussed in more detail in reporting from the process evaluation, but is flagged here as a factor that can detract from success of RPGs.

Positive qualitative outcomes that emerged at +3 years were: *enhanced capacity for thoughtful and reflective practice; whole systems culture change; changes to practice and work with*

families and *effects on staffing*.

Enhanced capacity for thoughtful and reflective practice

Whereas at +1 years this theme related to the enhanced capacity of individual practitioners and how they this fed into their work with families, at +3 years, it was more related to an enhanced capacity for reflective practice at an *organisational level*. Respondents described seeing enhanced evidence of reflection within RPGs but also within other organisational forums including pod supervision and multi-agency interactions.

> I do feel like the organisation's changed really… when you see pockets of thinking that would have never been there… I suppose there was a question for me again early on about, how much are people taking this thinking back into the pods and the teams? I suppose I feel a bit more confident that they are now really, and I think that there's a real openness to ideas… *Participant, Lead Practitioner focus group*

Whole systems culture change

A sense that people understand the change of practice model and the existence of RPGs as a *whole systems culture change* came through strongly in the data, as did evidence of holistic systemic thinking. For example, below a lead practitioner reflects on the links between her own group experience, how she facilitates and how that shapes front-line work with families.

> I've learned from experience. It's very much being part of the reflective practice group makes me think about (the external facilitator's) role, my role as a group member, how

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that works when I'm the facilitator with a group…When social workers come to the groups I facilitate, I try to hold in mind and promote that their experience in that group will then go into their experience with families, in a group that they're part of, so it feels quite fluid…It feels more holistic in a way, that the thinking and the learning becomes part of how you practice, and you can't divorce yourself from it. So it becomes part of you as a practitioner and I found that very grounding. That we can think together, we can be in a safe space, we can say the unsayable, because I think that's what we expect of families when we're talking about this bit doesn't work, and it needs to change and that being brave enough to create the safe space and say the unsayable is really containing. So it fits in with the value base about what we're actually doing here. So that's my learning is to really try to engage even if it's difficult and promote there is a way to practice with families. *Participant, Lead Practitioner Focus Group*

Changes to practice and work with families

Linked to this, a number of respondents stated that they had either personally done something different in their practice as a result of RPGs or that they had received feedback from their group members indicating that they had. At +3 years respondents went further in their thinking than at +1 year to hypothesise about *mechanisms* by which RPGs and the change of practice model may be influencing work with families.

I think we have through the restructure including the RPGs, but more stuff than the RPGS, come to a place where we go, maybe we're a bit more open and a bit more

flexible…Before the restructure we were more rigid about, right you do this or you do this and now we're going, do you know what, maybe there's a little bit in the middle where you're not certain but your job is to find out some more stuff …There's the absolute black and white social work, but 99% of it isn't in that space, and so I think the RPGs related to that being able to voice uncertainty and work out what's going on, and somehow it just fits with the culture of the organisation at the minute. Let's have a go at working it out. This might work, that might work, and some of its definite, like the numbers are going down in some areas of our work. *Participant, Lead Practitioner focus group*

Effects on staffing

Participants felt that RPGs and the new practice model represented an important investment in the workforce , which has attracted and retained staff.

I think just the existence of the groups first of all promotes relationship-based management. Yes, I think that we're saying that this is important. We're putting our money where our mouth is… I think they are a relationship-based intervention in their own right, if that makes sense. *Interview 1, Internal facilitator*

It rekindles that investment in staff and investment in a way of working that shows it's not a flash in the pan... Actually I think it continues to reinforce, 'this is how we want to see our workforce working with families, and in an organisation'. So I think in terms of

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the outcomes or what it achieves, and I think how you measure it is, could be in a range of ways. You could say, 'Well, actually, look at our stability of workforce over the last couple of years. As an organisation, we haven't had any agency social workers for at least a year-and-a-half. *Participant, Manager focus group*

Indicator data discussed in the preceding section bears witness to a number of the effects discussed above.

Analysis of performance indicator data

Outcomes for children and families

In this section, three organisational data sets are shown related to: number of children subject to a child protection plan by month; numbers of referrals and re-referrals by month and number of looked after children by month. These data are limited by a number of factors (different timescales for which data is available; existence of multiple co-existing influencing variables such that it is not possible to identify causal links), however they do show downward trends, indicative of an improvement of services to children and families that was suggested in qualitative data, where for example practitioners spoke about their 'numbers going down' as an indicator of RPG success (as shown in the quote above).

Figure 4:Number of Children subject of a child protection plan Oct 15-Dec 18

Figure 5: Number of Referrals and referrals in a month Dec 15-Dec 18

Figure 6: Number of Looked after children Oct 15-Oct 18

Impacts on staffing

Workforce data shows a large reduction in staff vacancies and employment of agency staff between 2015 and 2018. Turnover and sickness rates remain fairly constant.

Table 2: Workforce data

The local authority collects data from recent starters on why they chose to join them. In 2018, 2/3 of the returns mentioned the attraction of the relationship-

based model of practice (which encompasses RPGs), suggesting that these factors have been influential in the reductions of vacancies/agency staffing shown in table 2.

Limitations

Our evaluation had a number of limitations. A change in evaluator/researcher at the end the first year led to changes being made to the evaluation design moving forwards. This meant that the baseline survey data was not directly comparable to that from +1 and +3 years and therefore not

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included in this analysis. This has resulted in the loss of potentially important comparison data. Whilst qualitative data collected was rich, the opportunity to conduct a higher number of semi-structured interviews would have been useful to access the views of more practitioners from within differing jobs. Because we used organisationally collected indicator data there were some limitations in terms of years data was available and possibilities for analysis.

Discussion

These findings reflect positively on the development of the RPG project across its continued duration. There have been positive outcomes for individual practitioners and the organisation in terms of reduced vacancies and use of agency staffing. There are also indications of positive effects for children and families. A whole systems culture change has taken place across the organisation that is being experienced at many levels, even by those who are not currently attending RPGs.

It is clear that the outcomes have improved 'with age', a trend that has previously been identified (Van Roy, Vanheule & Inslegeres, 2015). An important factor in the project's continuing success has been the embedding of learning from the +1 year evaluation along with a change of external facilitators, which at a timely juncture appeared to enhance the confidence and skills of internal facilitators with positive 'trickle down' effects. However, a factor as important, if not more so, is the organisational commitment to 'stick with' the new model and RPGs for several years, weathering any initial (and continuing) difficulties. This has provided containment for staff at the organisational level and, in the words of Interviewee 1, has been a 'relationship-based intervention' in its own right.

RPGs as an 'intervention' have been implemented alongside a change to the overarching model

of practice. Respondents have given illuminative insights into the how these two factors have combined together to produce the outcomes described above, however we cannot draw definitive conclusions about causative relationships between the changes implemented and the outcomes achieved. However, realist evaluation theory suggests that useful questions to ask of real world complex interventions are related to how interventions work, for whom and under what circumstances.

In response to the 'how' question we suggest that RPGs in this setting worked by:

- providing a specific framework in which deep reflection and challenge can happen;

- being part of, and embodying a relationship-based approach to practice;

- holding and valuing staff such that staff are attracted and retained;

- contributing to an improvement and continuity in relationships and reflective capacity across the organisation and in work with service users;

- Enhancing whole systems awareness so that learning in RPGs carries forward fluidly into interactions with service users

In response to the 'for whom' question, this is harder to answer definitively but data suggests that they have worked better for some workers than others – in particular lead practitioners and senior managers. Whilst only briefly discussed here, it appears that part time workers, senior social workers and others in the 'squeezed middle' may find them less useful due to intense pressures of time and emotional load and the availability of other (preferred) sources of support.

In response to the 'under what circumstances' question – organisational commitment has emerged as a key factor in ensuring the success of this project. Relationships and trust within

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RPGs are also very important in allowing deep reflection but this may be challenged by issues of attendance, linked to issues such as job role pressures that have been discussed above.

Diagrammatically, the findings from the this evaluation can be represented by this novel theoretical model of the context, mechanisms and outcomes of the RPG project.

Figure 7: Theoretical model of RPG Context/Mechanisms/Outcomes in a local authority children's social work setting

Conclusion

In the preceeding sections, evidence is presented that for the first time identifies a set of quantitatively measured outcomes of RPGs for individual practitioners, the social work organisation and service users, alongside qualitative findings. This is significant because up until now studies in the social work context have relied solely on in-depth qualitative approaches. This study has plugged that gap and moved RPGs into the realms of evidence-based practice (which necessitates insights from both qualitative and quantitative approaches). From these empirical findings, we have presented a new theoretical model of the inter-relationship between the organisational context, RPG 'mechanisms' and outcomes in this setting. Such theorizing about how RPGs 'worked' and 'under what circumstances' is vital for transferability of learning to other social work settings, and for those making policy and funding decisions.

This approach was developed as part of a CfSWP evaluation of a whole system RPG model. The whole system RPG model is currently being rolled out to more sites with accompanying evaluations informed by this work. This offers the exciting possibility to test and refine the presented theoretical model, allowing researchers to compare the differing configurations of

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context/mechanisms/outcomes of RPGs within different settings.

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Nov 2015 onwards	Nov 2016-Mar 2017	Jan 2017 – Nov 2018	Nov 2018-Mar 2019
Project start. Initial surveys investigating wishes from RPGs, focus groups and observations. *(Baseline data collection)*	+1 year Survey, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations. *(Process evaluation and evaluation of outcomes at this stage)*	Change of external facilitators, first evaluation report, minor changes to model instigated. Continued operation.	+3 year Repeat +1 year survey, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and analysis of organisationally held indicator data. *(Outcomes evaluation)*

Table 1: Evaluation timeline

Rates shown as percentages	2015	2016	2017	2018
Turnover	15	14.7	14.8	14.9
Vacancies	6	7.2	0.9	0.4
Agency staffing	14	11.4	1.4	0.0
Sickness	3	3.7	3.9	3.5

Table 2: Workforce data

Figure 1: 'Professional' outcomes

Figure 2: 'Self efficacy' outcomes

Figure 3: 'Relationship' outcomes

Figure 4: Number of children subject to a child protection plan Oct 15-Dec 18

Figure 5: Number of referrals and re-referrals in a month Dec 15-Dec 18

Figure 6: Number of looked after children Oct 15-Oct 18

Figure 7: Theoretical model of RPG context/mechanisms/outcomes in a local authority

children's social work setting