Confronting Our Discomfort
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How to Set Up a Support-Supervision Group

The real issue for teachers, as for all of us, is not whether we do or do not possess prejudices, but whether we can honestly recognize them in ourselves. Only by admitting and facing our inevitable prejudices can we hope to deal with them effectively, to make up for them, compensate for them, or otherwise undo any damage caused by them. . . . To face this honestly is the first necessary step for moving on to more positive relationships between persons and groups.

Herbert M. Greenberg, Teaching with Feeling

In fact, teacher empowerment does not occur without reflection and the development of the means to express justifications. Without such empowerment, teachers may become victims of their personal biographies, systemic political demands, and ecological conditions, rather than making use of them in developing and sustaining worthwhile and significant change.

Virginia Richardson, “Significant and Worthwhile Change in Teaching Practice”

It’s as if the two great movements of our time, those for social justice and for self-realization, were halves of a whole just waiting to come together into truly revolutionary groups.

Gloria Steinem, Revolution from Within

Developing communication skills (how to listen to others, how to tell “my” story) is a crucial component in anti-bias work. Listening to each other’s stories helps us understand how people develop survival skills
so that we are better able to negotiate our differences. If teachers are given the opportunity to reflect with others about some of these uncomfortable feelings, they might be able to change their practices or biased behaviors in more authentic ways. In addition, through discussion we learn about ourselves. In order to understand ourselves better, some of us need support or compassionate co-reflection with mentors, supervisors, colleagues, or support groups.

**Reflective Practice**

Reflection has been recognized as a useful technique for helping teachers integrate the scientific and personal knowledge systems. It is assumed that as teachers reflect on their practices, they can make their understanding of classroom events more explicit, and therefore more amenable to control and direction. Teachers who reflect on how they feel and why they feel the way they do are in a better position to understand their interactions with others. (Bowman 1989)

NAEYC’s National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development has developed a conceptual framework that identifies key principles of an effective professional development system (NAEYC 1994). At each level, the professional is expected to engage in reflective practice that contributes to continuing professional development.

Exemplary teachers participate in a wide range of reflective practices that reinforce their creativity, stimulate their personal growth, and enhance their professionalism. They exemplify the highest ethical ideals and embrace professional standards in assessing their practice. Ultimately, self-reflection contributes to teachers’ depth of knowledge, skills, and dispositions and adds dignity to their practice. (NAEYC 1996, 94)

Reflective practice is not a new idea. John Dewey defines reflective thought as: “Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey 1933, 9). In *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, Dewey talks about reflective thinking as having two phases where discomfort is considered part of the
process as the thinker works with resolving doubt, perplexity, and mental difficulty. Teachers are encouraged to cultivate certain, specific attitudes toward reflective thinking such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility for facing the consequences. Dewey goes on to warn teachers about trying to please administrators or parents because very often these are the “chief forces that determine beliefs apart from and even contrary to the operations of intelligent thought” and “it may lead a person too readily to fall into the prejudices of others and may weaken his independence of judgment” (1933, 28–29).

There are different ways of looking at reflective practice. Much of the research looks at teachers’ ability to assess a situation and make sense out of the experience. Each person makes a different sense or meaning. Supervisors or mentors assist some and some individuals do it alone. Self-reflection is a medium for self-awareness. For example, the idea of self-awareness is discussed as assisting teachers in their classroom practices and personal lives and is characterized as “valuable, perhaps indispensable” (Ayers 1989, ix). Ayers suggests that if teachers become more self-conscious, they could then become “more intentional, more able to endorse or reject aspects of their own teaching that they found hopeful or contrary, more able to author their own teaching scripts” (140).

In a later book, To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher (1993), Ayers uses his own autobiography and self-reflection, which he believes is crucial for teaching. He suggests that teachers should be asking: “Who are you? How did you come to take on your views and outlooks? What forces helped to shape you? What was it like for you to be ten? What have you made of yourself? Where are you heading?” and further states, “self-knowledge is most important (and least attended to)” (129).

One of the ways teacher educators and researchers discuss reflective practice is through the teachers telling their own stories (Ayers 1993, Clandinin, Davies, Hogan, and Kennard 1993, Goodson, 1992, Hall, Campbell, and Miech 1997). In this way, the researcher is able to understand how teachers develop values and beliefs and is able to assist them more effectively in understanding how those values affect decision making. In one case study, the teacher not only tells her story, but shares in the process of self-understanding. Implications of this
study are that teachers need to be supported and considered as a part of their own process for change in future professional development (Yonemura 1986). These ideas further encourage teacher-educators in supporting or “growing” teachers in a collaborative way rather than top-down (Caruso and Fawcett 1986, Fenichel 1992, Jones 1993).

Virginia Richardson talks about teacher perceptions and beliefs about themselves as learners and teachers as she reviews the literature about making change in teachers’ practice (Richardson 1990). Teachers have control over the decisions they make. Without their active involvement, autonomy, and reflection it seems difficult to make changes in classroom practice. Richardson mentions a number of case studies that demonstrate, for example, how a sixth-grade math teacher’s beliefs about how children learn to read are strongly tied to his view of himself as a reader and how he learned to read. Richardson asks: “How then, are we to think about affecting change, other than through a type of individualistic, psychoanalytic approach to teacher education?” (13).

Any of us who has had the good fortune . . . of befriending someone who listens carefully to what we are saying and cares about what we are thinking, soon finds out that with regard to the most fundamental issues we are ambivalent, confused and find it difficult to know what we believe. (Brown 1982, 12)

Having outlined some of the problems of teacher education, Brown discusses the use of a new metaphor, namely therapy. Some of the features of therapy would not only “enable us to understand what we do in fact believe, but to help us find out what is behind those beliefs. What are the images, fears, joys, associations we hold onto that generate such beliefs?” (12).

Self-reflection is useful for teachers as they make moment-to-moment decisions in the classroom. It helps them understand why they do what they do, affects their perceptions and beliefs, and supports changes teachers make in curriculum and classroom management. Different ways of facilitating self-reflection are mentoring, in-service training or “growing teachers” through listening to their stories. Counseling therapy is suggested as a type of self-reflection that would affect change and enable educators to gain a deeper understanding of their attitudes or beliefs.
Support Groups for Teachers

Human, emotional qualities of the teacher are at the very heart of teaching (Greenberg 1969). According to Greenberg, no matter how much emphasis is placed on such other qualities in teaching as educational technique, technology, or equipment, the humanity of the teacher is the vital ingredient for children’s learning. Teacher-educators should be concerned, in teacher preparation, about the study of the emotional life of the teacher.

“The behavior of a teacher, like that of everyone else, is a function of his concepts of self” (Combs 1965, 22). This concept of self will affect every aspect of a teacher’s behavior and is, in turn, affected by attitudes, beliefs, and values. According to Combs, teacher-educators should be “deeply concerned” with the kinds of self-concepts teachers are developing in training. Teacher education needs to be more than instruction of subject matter, methodologies, or curriculum and even faculty should help teachers develop their inner selves.

In 1955, Jersild conducted a five-year study where he surveyed approximately one thousand people, some of whom had experienced psychotherapy and had been seeking to discover what the idea of self-understanding might mean in their work as teachers. The responses of the people indicated not only that the idea of self-understanding was an acceptable one, but also that many expressed a desire for help such as might be gotten from group therapy (Jersild 1955). The teachers involved in the study talked about feelings of loneliness and anxiety and suggested that they were serious in their search for intimate and personal meaning in what they were doing. Jersild recommended a form of group therapy under the leadership of a professional, specifically trained for such work, and stressed the importance of teachers facing themselves.

A teacher is more likely to become compassionate and understanding of the children through self-acceptance (Jersild 1954). “We must raise the question of personal significance in connection with everything we seek to learn and everything that is taught from the nursery school through postgraduate years” (Jersild 1955, 136). According to Jersild, the emotional life of a teacher is a dimension of teaching that is more often ignored than explored, and in the long run results in a loss to children. Unresolved emotional conflicts affect teachers’ rela-
tionships with children, including attitudes toward their own self-worth, anger, hostility, sex, pride and shame, and acceptance and rejection. Teachers are unable to understand a child’s anxiety and fears unless they are able to examine their own. Calling on teacher-educators to think about the implications for teacher preparation, Jersild has one broad principle to offer: “To gain in knowledge of self one must have the courage to seek it and the humility to accept what one might find” (1954, 412). This process might be painful or uncomfortable and might be sought out either in private therapy or in a group therapy situation.

Jersild further suggests that in a group setting teachers are able to learn to face themselves by the interactions and responses of the other participants toward them. “It is in a setting of joint and common work and airing of self with other people that some of the richest possibilities for self-examination can be found” (413). Jersild strongly urges the education community to add this type of support group to teacher preparation and ongoing staff development.

During the eighties, the organization of support or mutual assistance groups proliferated (Levine 1988). While reflecting the values of empowerment for people suffering from conditions attributed to oppressive social environments or those desiring to undertake personal change, the social support provided by these groups seemed to help their members in different ways. These types of groups were led by the group members themselves and not by a professional trained for such work, as Jersild suggested earlier. The group members no longer felt isolated. They shared feelings, which developed a sense of solidarity, and identified with one another in a way that enabled them to see that if one is able to change, so is the other.

“Spontaneously-developed” support groups for professional development are examined in what is considered to be the first study of its kind about teachers and support groups (Rich 1991). These groups have emerged in response to the needs of teachers. Most teachers work alone, behind closed classroom doors with little support while balancing personal and professional values with emotionally stressful classroom situations. The advantage of a professional support group according to Rich’s study is that it provides personal support and a reference group “in which members are perceived as being like each other” (39).
One feminist researcher advocates developing groups for social change. “Revolutionary groups” should be “free, diverse, no bigger than the extended family—and everywhere” (Steinem 1993, 348). Basic guidelines for setting up “revolutionary groups” include describing the size of the group; recommending the duration, length of meeting for “meaningful change”; and that “no leader” and “confidentiality and honesty” would be prerequisites for all participants. Steinem suggests starting out with the question “What do you hope will change because of this group?” (357) and includes topics for discussion such as education, childhood, spirituality, and relationships.

For all social justice movements and other efforts to make self-respecting change, these new-and-improved small groups could be a crucial bridge between organizations and the people they’re designed to help; between personal experience and its political cause; between the present and the future. (Steinem 1993, 351)

Social change includes taking a stand against racism. Taking initiative against racism includes developing the skill of “support listening” which reinforces self-reflection while others listen to another talk about experiences, feelings, and plans (Vernon-Jones 1993). In order to develop this skill, it is suggested that teachers form support groups whereby they will use support listening and learn about racism in a safe environment. The difference between action groups, discussion groups, and support groups, according to Vernon-Jones, is that members of a support group build trust and thus will be able to “listen with caring attention to each member so each one can think through issues and work through feelings” (1993, 5).

Teachers are encouraged to find a support group and engage in consciousness-raising activities to enable themselves to understand their own biases better should they be interested in anti-bias work (Derman-Sparks 1989). By understanding the source of their own biases, teachers will then be able to help children with theirs. In a later report from the Culturally Relevant Anti-Bias Leadership Project (Cronin et al. 1998), Derman-Sparks encourages the reflective process through group work, and reminds us it is important to connect self-reflection with activism:
Doing culturally relevant anti-bias work requires growth at the personal level as well as in skills for creating professional and systemic change. Action without personal growth is an invitation to contribute to the problem one is trying to solve; however, personal growth without taking action in one’s various communities becomes self-indulgence. (18)

During the late fifties and early sixties, teacher-educators suggested that “preparing teachers” should involve a development of awareness about their emotional life and that individual or group therapy would be a useful medium for self-understanding. In the eighties, support groups were referred to as _self-help groups_ and were led by group members themselves. Derman-Sparks’ groups supported a commitment to acting for change in the community.

**Creating a Support-Supervision Group**

In the quiet of my one-roomed schoolhouse in Israel, I dreamed of a support-supervision group for teachers. Once or twice I asked Zehava, my supervisor, why she did not organize such a group for us. I knew I was grappling with integrating my personal feelings with professional behaviors and interventions in the classroom. At staff development meetings I would often hear my colleagues talk in biased ways about children and families. I was sure we all needed supervision that would support our feelings, and, at the same time help us make connections between the personal and professional. Zehava concluded that such a group sounded too much like therapy and would not be suitable for everyone.

My dream was realized in the spring of 1995 when my dissertation committee allowed me to facilitate an anti-bias support-supervision group for early childhood teachers and administrators in Buffalo, New York (Meyer 1997). At first the members of the committee were concerned about the rationale for such a group. They voiced similar concerns as Zehava had done in Israel. It sounded too much like therapy. While one person of the committee applauded the idea of some kind of therapy support for teachers, the others wanted me to make sure it would not become that. I was given permission to facilitate the group and conduct a study at the same time.
I did not want the purpose of the group to be mutual assistance or self-indulgence. Instead, the group would give support and supervision. Participants were encouraged to make connections between their emotions and biases specifically with interactions and behaviors with children and families. Therefore, I named the group support-supervision. At the final session, group members were asked to choose pseudonyms in order to ensure their confidentiality as they had agreed to be quoted in the written section of the research project. (All names of the participants used in this chapter are pseudonyms.) They tell the story in their own words through written journals, and the interviews shared with Yi Hao, a graduate student.

. . . it was amazing that the group for these two hours every Tuesday were able to really search into themselves about different issues . . . this group serves more from inside out.

—Gloria

It’s a place to talk about the private stuff of your life or of your work. And it always does seem to tie back into your private life. If you started at private life it ties back into work. If you start at work, it ties back into private life. They’re just interconnected . . . it just evolves, and that’s what excites.

—Hattie

. . . we discuss things. People’s biases and how our own bias can be portrayed onto the children . . . we talked about personal things amongst the group members . . . Just talking about how our biases affect ourselves and how it affects the children we deal with every day. And then how, if they come from different backgrounds . . . how that would affect us in dealing with them.

—Chloe

Teachers and directors from four childcare centers voluntarily participated in the support group. They met with me, their facilitator, for a period of twenty weeks at ten bi-weekly sessions each lasting two hours. At first with the help of a childcare organization, I sent letters randomly to thirty-five childcare centers. I invited teachers to join a support group if they were interested in implementing the anti-bias curriculum. Originally, fourteen women joined; three were adminis-
trators, and eleven were teachers who worked with children ages six weeks to five years. Four teachers left the group during the first six weeks. One described feeling discomfort with the level of intimacy and personal nature of discussion.

You know, if someone was upset, she’d (the facilitator) make sure that we all recognized that and if someone responded in a certain kind of way she would ask them about it or ask them to clarify it, why they responded in that way or whatever. To some extent it makes people uncomfortable but I think that was part of the learning experience. Because it’s all about communication and communication makes people feel uncomfortable depending on what’s being said.

—Danielle

Participation in the group included:

- Attending ten bi-weekly support group sessions,
- Writing a personal journal,
- Reading Derman-Sparks’ *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* (at the beginning of the group sessions, participants received a copy of the book which they were allowed to keep if they remained in the group until the end of the twenty-week period),
- Allowing the group sessions to be audiotaped,
- Agreeing to be observed by Nancy (a colleague and graduate student) for two of the sessions,
- Participating in an in-depth interview for an hour and a half with Yi, and
- Answering questionnaires about their expectations for the support-supervision group experience, at the beginning and end of the twenty-week period.

Within the sessions, participants were encouraged to discuss personal feelings and, at times, they were given specific exercises or assignments.
For example, they were asked to draw and describe a picture of their family, and, during Women’s History Month, asked to define what it meant for them to be a woman. Hattie’s poem, written in a group exercise, follows.

**To Be a Woman**

Wo
man -
Whoa - man -
Slow down man -
How much can you do in one day mohn!!

mom.

Eons, years of herstory
So much hidden
mystery
of life
and bonds
of lives
beyond
our own
Interwoven webs

Support group sessions were held on-site at one of the childcare centers in the evening. The meeting place constituted a large conference room with a number of comfortable chairs and a long table. It was the same throughout the twenty-week period of group sessions and was conducive to a relaxed atmosphere.

My experience was accompanied by a personal journal and I audiotaped and transcribed all support-supervision group sessions. Prior to each support group session, I received an hour of supervision from a professional counselor. I shared my feelings and biases with him about what had happened with the participants two weeks before. Through discussion with him, I made changes, modifications, or chose interventions that seemed appropriate to the emotional issues that came up within the group. In addition, his guidance helped me understand the dynamics of interactions among group members and between them and myself.

I brought to the group my own subjectivity and bias, knowledge of early childhood education, and some counseling skills. As I worked to understand the data collected and to facilitate the group, I tried to
make sense about which part belonged to me, and which the members. I realized that many times I challenged the participants to search for connections between personal biases and interactions with children or teachers in their programs. At times I felt I succeeded. It was difficult at first when I did not. I learned, time and time again, that my biases and feelings affected how I heard the participants. By becoming intimately involved with the way these women were feeling about their personal and professional lives, and often sharing my personal background, I was able, many times, to challenge them and myself. For a period of four months, it seemed as if perceptions about themselves and society were broadened, and awareness about bias and our work became, as Chloe described it, “big.”

Bias would be a whole bunch of stuff. . . . Yeah, it could be the way a family is. It’s not the mother/father anymore. It could be sexual orientation. It could be culture . . . like a person with a physical handicap who’s in a wheelchair. You know it’s just the way you speak about someone I guess . . . or even body language towards someone . . . facial expressions, tone of voice, you know talking down to someone. . . . I don’t even know if I could define it because it’s so wide. I don’t know if I could give a pat answer for it. . . . Because it’s all around us all the time. I have written in my journal that it’s subtle, you know . . . it’s a big answer.

—Chloe, interview

What Did We Learn?

Derman-Sparks (1989) identifies four goals for self-education and states that a support group is essential for preparing and implementing an anti-bias curriculum.

Increase awareness of your attitudes about gender, race, ethnicity, and different physical abilities; learn to identify ways that institutional racism, sexism and handicappism affect your program; gain an understanding of how young children develop identity and attitudes; plan ways to introduce anti-bias curriculum into your setting. (111)

All ten of the women in the group talked about the experience as beneficial to them. Six expressed ideas for future plans including starting
similar groups in other centers, experimenting with the duration of
the group, involving more than one center, and using this model for
pre-service teacher education.

I think it’s really important and I don’t know how you would
get more women to do this. I’m saying women because that’s
mostly who is in daycare . . . and I would like to know how you
would take it a step further and encourage other women who
aren’t really pro-diversity to begin with, to come and take a
chance. . . . See, in the group I think what happened was people
were able to explore stuff, listen to things and grow from it
. . . and I wish there was a way that those women could try out
talking how they feel. ’Cause then they would hear that it is re-
ally hard for me too. It’s not easy. But I think that they think
that’s just the way I am and that it is easy to make those deci-
sions.

—Hattie, interview

The group itself needs to go longer. Because we were just com-
ing into our own, so to speak. Really starting to do the hard work.
The first four to five sessions easily went a lot too, not that we
didn’t deal with things, but we dealt with them at a different
level. The best impact is coming now and I hate to see us quit.
So, going into it I think it’s more of an ongoing process . . . if it
were an ongoing outlet for a professional, I would leave it as
that . . . I think that this type of group should be a part certainly
of studies to prepare to be a teacher . . . we have to understand
a little bit about what happens in here. You know, we’re giving
to children who are so vulnerable. Who need such a safety net.
Who need, need to feel that safety. Pardon the redundancy.

—Simcha

Teachers often experience loneliness in their work as they spend
long hours with young children, having to make moment-by-moment
decisions. Many of these decisions are confused or obstructed by bias.
All ten women described feeling a fundamental change in their per-
ceptions about bias. They made connections between those percep-
tions and their interactions with children or staff. For example, in the
final session, Hattie disclosed to the group that a child, with whom
she had been struggling for many months, was clearly disappointed
when he heard she would be leaving his class for a new position in her center. She described that her discomfort at his anger had decreased because, with the group’s help, she was able to connect her own feelings of anger, which had reminded her of a difficult relationship in her past. She had identified the boy in her class as having similar characteristics with the man of that relationship.

Remember the struggle I had about that thing with the angry stuff I had with him? By working through it here, some of it, I was able to then work with him in a different way... and I was saying that when he found out that I wasn’t gonna be the teacher in the room anymore, he was jumping up and down, literally jumping up and down going: “No, you can’t go! No you can’t go!” I looked at him and said, “T. H. is that you?” I couldn’t believe it. Obviously we’d gotten somewhere because he would never have done that, I don’t think.

—Hattie, final group session

In a support group situation, teachers were able to explore emotional, personal issues of bias, and identify with others in similar situations. Although the process was at times uncomfortable, it appears that sharing the experience with others, in a trusting and respectful environment, helped some of them undertake personal change. Two specific issues, dealt with intensively by the group, were beneficial to the women in their personal and professional lives and are worthy of attention.

**Sexual Orientation**

I told the people who missed the last meeting that I was a lesbian. That discussion led into one about Gloria’s students. It was a quite thorough discussion around issues of gender and sexuality (in a broad sense). This discussion seemed to be exactly what this group is about. We talked about our personal feelings about it but also talked about the practical (which is what I like to do!) solutions about talking to parents, helping individual children as well as groups of children deal with differences—helping the individual accept and be themself and teach others to treat each other with respect.

—Katherine, journal
Participants were able to discuss the issue of sexual orientation in a trusting and respectful environment. Two of the women came out. Both of them, as well as those who received this information, needed support in processing their emotions. Teachers and administrators benefited from the experience of trusting each other enough to share these intimate feelings. Those who received support by the group as they disclosed their lifestyle described feeling stronger and more confident in dealing with life on both personal and professional levels.

The discussion of “touchy feely” was great. It touched on the heart of the gender issues. I can appreciate Katherine’s sensitivity about how she might be misinterpreted by staff. As a lesbian, I think about these perceptions and probably lend much more importance to how actions might be read than necessary.

—Simcha, journal

Simcha surprised me the most. I feel she had a tremendous amount of courage to tell everyone, many of them strangers, that she is gay. I didn’t know that about her . . . she reminds me of my sister . . . who is also gay. My sister and I are identical twins—isn’t it interesting that we have the same genetic makeup and were raised in the same environment yet she is gay and I am not?

—Danielle, journal

Sexual orientation—never been exposed as much as this group—I feel very comfortable with this, never thought I would.

—Chloe, journal

I started to think about how early childhood programs support gay families in general. If they are not dealing with it, which seems to be the case according to experiences from group members, how are teachers, families, and consequently, children, coping with the realities of their lives? The question of sexual orientation is an emotional subject, connected to feelings of fear and guilt, and concepts of morality and religious ideologies. The support-supervision group proved to be an effective environment. Participants were able to process a range of complex emotions and values, develop understanding of homophobia, and increase acceptance of themselves and others.
Anger

A number of group sessions dealt with anger. All of the women in the group experienced discomfort about expressing anger. Two women described concerns about angry children in their classrooms. Some advice was shared between group members. For example, introducing a punching cushion or areas of quiet and privacy for children who were overstimulated. Teachers were able to resolve difficult situations with angry children successfully partly because of the advice shared, but, more specifically, they realized that some of their anger had been transferred onto children from their own personal situations. Soon after one of the women had processed her own anger and fear about her mother’s illness, she expressed that the children in her class did not seem as angry to her as before. Hattie described an improvement in her relationship with a little boy in her class, T. H. This had been anger about a past love that she felt she processed with the group.

Group members were able to explore some of these intense and frightening emotions. Most of the women described feeling generally more comfortable with their emotions. As a result they were more accepting of children’s emotions. Ultimately, this directly affected a change in behaviors toward children in their classrooms. Directors described that they were more aware and accepting of emotions of teachers they were supervising in their centers.

Awareness of Bias

All group members described a sense of heightened awareness about bias as it related to themselves personally, children in classrooms, or with teachers in their centers. All of them made connections between how their own prejudices affected how they treat children, families, colleagues, or, even, board members. Evidence of this was supported by data from all participants, including definitions of bias, transcripts of the support group process, journals, and interviews. For about half of the women, it was surprising for them to discover in fact, just how biased they were.

Some described awareness as heightened consciousness. Two teachers expressed that some of their interactions with and perceptions of
angry children in their classrooms had been directly because of unconscious emotional issues. This is an important point to consider: Bias or unconscious emotions influence teachers’ interactions or perceptions. Many times, the results are harmful to children and families. Taken a step further, they are harmful to groups of people.

Heightened awareness or consciousness is an important step in the process of self-reflection and, consequently, the ability to make changes. However, it requires taking risks and, for many, that feels uncomfortable or unsafe when experienced alone. One teacher-educator suggests being a “resistance fighter on behalf of children” (Ayers 1993, 131). That is a tough order for teachers unless they are given support and a safe environment in which to explore those risks of self-criticism that he recommends.

Counseling

Facilitating a person’s journey from unconscious to conscious leads us into the language of counseling. Some of the participants raised this question in different ways. They reflected on this aspect of the support group in journals and interviews. For example, when asked what was the worst thing she had experienced in the support group sessions, Lydia talked about intensity:

The conversation in the session would get so intense you would have trouble sleeping that evening. That would be the worst thing, because it was uncomfortable the next day.

—Lydia

Katherine suggested that people had left the group in the beginning because of the discomfort at opening up. The women talked about this at the final session.

Well, we started off with probably twice as much staff as we ended up with. And I think a lot of people are very uncomfortable being so open and personal.

—Katherine
I feel at times the group has gone off the track in the sense that we have turned it into a therapy session—which has worked out well for some but others have been put off by it.

—Chloe, journal

Simcha described the group as being different to regular staff meetings. She attributed that to the emotional nature of the group.

[N]ot that it was unprofessional, but we crossed a line that would not necessarily happen in a staff meeting. The emotions... people were very free to speak, very free to support or criticize, which happened over time as well as we became more comfortable with each other. Um, it was much more emotionally based. ...You typically would not have, or hopefully would not have, staff members crying in a staff meeting. And it was not unusual for someone to become emotional to the point of tears in our group.

—Simcha

Simcha raised an important consideration when she used the expression, crossed a line. Questions are raised by crossing that line: Should teacher education and counseling become integrated or linked together in some way? Should self-reflection relate only to cognitive and social awareness? Do educators have a right to emotional self-awareness? Or, as Katherine asked in the reunion session two years after the support group, “Is it even a responsibility?”

Self-reflection does not relate only to cognitive and social awareness. Counselors, for example, explore and understand their own personal bias, attitudes, and emotions so that they will interact with clients more effectively. In some situations, counselors are required to have supervision for that very reason. In fact, they are encouraged to develop personal, emotional awareness. There is no support for teachers to explore or understand their own emotions. It is definitely not required and sometimes not even mentioned. And yet, teachers continue to deal with many uncomfortable, emotional issues all day.

In the end, counseling was not considered a limitation of the support group or of the study. Although therapy-type issues arose, the group attempted no therapy per se. It did, however, raise important
concerns for creating a safe environment for participants in future groups of this nature.

Opening up one’s private life to others is making oneself vulnerable. Some may be uncomfortable with this if they feel it is something expected of them or imposed upon them. . . . Participation in this kind of support group should be voluntary. It should be made clear from the beginning that there will be sessions that are intimate and personally revealing. Some counseling/therapy is involved for participating members. . . . The facilitator should be properly trained in counseling and education when working with personal issues and biases in a support group for teachers.

—Nancy, participant observer

**The Facilitator’s Role**

According to the group, the role of the support-supervision group facilitator should include four points. The facilitator

1. should not be an immediate supervisor to any one member of the support group
2. should have counseling skills
3. should receive counseling supervision to ensure a safe, trusting, and respectful environment
4. should have a clearly defined role.

The facilitator would have to deal with different emotional situations within the group. For example, one member of the group became anxious when other people were sad or angry. She tried to placate and would often intercede and prevent other women from processing their feelings. The facilitator would have to deal with group dynamics like these in a way that would provide a trusting and respectful environment for everyone.

Childcare workers, as other people, often have intense personal struggles to contend with. Many people are afraid to address emotions because they can be so powerful . . . the facilitator should be trained in counseling and education when working with personal issues and biases in a support group of teachers.
Once such intimate emotions are shared with supervisors, it may be difficult to separate work and professional life from private and personal life... the facilitator should be a person other than the immediate supervisor of any of the members of the support group.

—Nancy, participant observer

It is important for the facilitator of such a group to develop a trusting and respectful environment. Counseling skills such as active listening, and the ability to explore and confront difficult feelings with the participants are necessary. All the women described the importance of feeling safe when talking about feelings such as anger, fear, shame, or guilt. Self-reflection was uncomfortable for some. Gloria and Danielle talked about discomfort as a way to “rattle” or “shake people up” into making changes. Simcha called it “risky.” Danielle described communication as sometimes being painful.

In order to ensure the safety of group members, I sought out supervision from an experienced and professional counselor. At each session with him, I examined my own emotions that were aroused in support group sessions. At times, I worked on understanding how others might be feeling. At others, I explored my own feelings. In the beginning it was difficult for me to let go of a cognitive level of discussion and I seemed to prevent emotional situations from becoming too intense. I experienced fear of confronting (in a counseling sense) or of what Katherine had termed, “getting past what you’re thinking into what you’re feeling.”

I named one of my supervision sessions in my journal, “help me with M.” Together with the counselor, I explored my discomfort with a member of the group who continuously interrupted others in an aggressive manner, usually when they needed to talk about difficult emotions. Talking about it with the counselor helped me understand that, in fact, M was becoming anxious with the emotional situation in the group and needed help, herself, at those moments.

In the beginning, I noticed that I laughed at moments when situations became serious or intimate. I named that session in my journal, “How do I take myself seriously?” I worked with the supervisor on my fears of expressing and accepting others’ emotions. It became important to me to ensure a safe environment for the group and
myself. As I assisted group members in identifying how bias might be obstructing or influencing their interactions with children, it made sense for me to go through a similar process with the counseling supervisor. A clear example of this was when it came time for the support group sessions to end.

Confronting my own subjectivity was essential in the process of separation and clarification of boundaries. This was a point at which I became joined with the women in the group. Separation was difficult for me. This resulted in some confusion and anxiety in one or two of the final sessions. I had become caring of the group members and was concerned about leaving them. Personally, I was experiencing anxiety of separation for two reasons. I felt the strength and support of this group of women for myself, and wanted to take care of them forever. Their personal and professional lives had become important to me. Struggling through these difficult emotions and processing them with my supervisor enabled me to clarify my goals. Finally I was able to help the group members understand and accept that the group sessions, as we knew them, would end.

It was necessary for me to help the group focus on topics, whether they were curriculum-related or emotional issues. Hattie described it, “not allowing us to skirt an issue.” Nancy noted: “Group discussions which include personal issues can easily veer off track. A trained and professional facilitator is necessary to tie the personal issues back into professional ones.” Nine of the ten women thought it was important for me not to be personally involved so that I was able to include everyone and make it safe. I often discussed this with my supervisor. We explored the idea that the group might become a self-help model and my role might change to one of participant. I was feeling pulled by dynamics within the group to become one of them. After many discussions he helped me clarify the boundaries. This became beneficial for support group members as well. “Feeling safe to feel pain together” (my journal).

**Childcare, a Women’s Issue**

We all wrote journals during the four-month period of support group sessions. I explained, at the first meeting, that journal writing was voluntary. The purpose of the journals was a way for the
women to express themselves privately if there were issues they were uncomfortable sharing within the larger group. Eight of the ten participants kept journals. Two did not write at all. One wrote regularly, describing it as “valuable for reflection,” and enjoyable. All eight journals were well-written in terms of the women expressing how they felt about group sessions, personal issues, and recommendations for the future. Nine of them talked about not being good at writing. A couple of them spoke of themselves as “bad at writing things down” or “doing a bad job of writing.” Hattie and Katherine did not think they wrote well either when, in fact, their journals were prolific and well-written:

I don’t like writing a lot. And [pause] some of it is I don’t think I’m good with words in terms of saying, putting my feelings into words.

—Katherine

For anyone else it would be pretty bad reading. It’s not the best reading but for myself I am able to work some stuff out there.

—Hattie

Although the evidence was not conclusive or overwhelming in any way, the women’s doubts about their ability to write raised some questions for me about early childhood teachers in general. My own bias influenced my interpretation and curiosity as to why 90 percent of the group described themselves as bad writers. Once again I joined with the group members. As a teacher, I have moved in and out of confidence many times throughout my life about my own intellectual ability, and I wondered if this was one of the reasons for these women’s perceptions of themselves as writers. I remembered how I chose to become a teacher when I was young. Or did I? In fact, when I was young, I do not remember thinking about it very much at all. At some point in my youth I had dreamed of becoming a journalist, musician, or perhaps an actress.

Women are socialized from a young age to believe that there are few career options for them, and that they should choose nurturing professions such as childcare, teaching, or nursing. When asked why they chose childcare as a profession, all ten women gave similar
reasons: “I wanted to since I was a child,” “I love kids,” “I kind of fell into it,” and one actually said, “Teaching is something I’ve always wanted to do . . . I’ve never really thought of anything else to do.”

As discussed in Chapter 4, childcare is not high up in the educational hierarchy, among other issues of compensation, education, and professionalism. Even many early childhood teachers themselves do not have high regard for childcare providers. The support-supervision group became beneficial for the women’s self-esteem. Some of them described feeling stronger, more confident and able to make changes. For example, Hattie was able to change curriculum decisions in her classroom even though her colleagues at the center disapproved. She called herself an activist. Katherine and Simcha disclosed their sexual orientation and both described feeling stronger and more assertive because of the support of the group. Simcha moved in together with her companion and came out publicly. Danielle created a “Social Awareness Group” in her center. Half of the participants became involved in the local childcare organization either at staff networking or advocacy levels. Hattie made conscious changes regarding herself and the angry children in her classroom. Gloria chose her pseudonym from “Gloria Steinem” expressing a newfound feeling of confidence through her new name.

**How Could the Support-Supervision Group Have Been Done Better?**

African American, Native American, Hispanic, or Asian cultures were not represented in the group. Neither were men. Although an invitation letter was sent to over thirty childcare centers throughout the Western New York region, participants who volunteered were all Caucasian women. In all the childcare centers that were informed about the group, there are less than 5 percent male teachers. This might have explained why there were no male participants. Reasons why people of color did not volunteer are unclear. This was a limitation. The group dealt with issues of age, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. However, culture was dealt with theoretically and not on as emotional a level as sexual orientation, for example. There were some discussions about celebrating cultural holidays.
I just finished calling the group to confirm plans for our Seder. I don’t know if I can effectively comment on how excited I am about all of this, but of course I’ll give it a stab. Everyone sounds genuinely interested in participating. Some, like Molly, are really looking forward to coming. Even as an adult, I am finding myself to be so pleased that others are interested and curious about my Judaism. Can you imagine how children must feel? This has great implications for our work. Children, like adults, need to feel that we are genuinely interested in the specific aspects of their lives that they feel are important.

—Simcha, journal

Oh, I actually went to a social event. Meaning, some of us from the group got together and had a Seder, which is a Jewish holiday. So, I did that with them. That was nice. Cause I have no social life [laughs].

—Hattie

When relating to gender bias, participants expressed it as women’s issues and needs. Some of the participants named the group: “Women’s Group.” Male gender issues were mentioned in passing and dealt with theoretically. While members of the group felt comfortable to talk to each other, this was a limitation. Different cultures and both genders should be represented when organizing a support-supervision group.

A support group such as this should have a definite beginning and end. It should not go on for an endless time. Everybody’s issues need not be resolved.

—Nancy, participant observer

Length of time seemed to be a limitation for the group members. Nine of the women wanted the group to continue and some felt there were issues left unresolved. Length of the support-supervision group was defined by the research study. However, similar groups might continue for a longer period of time, depending on the needs of its members. Although length of time was clearly defined at the beginning of the group, participants expressed disappointment and anger about its conclusion, and negotiated intensely for its continuation towards the
end. Simcha reiterated her feelings about this limitation two years after the group had ended.

Getting started obviously required our group to get to know each other on an intimate basis. It seems to me that the issues surrounding bias are so deeply rooted in our personalities that we must first establish a groundwork that can be easily integrated into consideration of the professional issues. Without that level of comfort, it is difficult to truly explore the impact of bias in our work . . . I think that the trust issue is big. . . .

—Simcha, written comments after the reunion session

With regard to this study, the length of the group limited the data itself. Had the group been a few months longer, different issues might have been presented or evidence stronger on certain themes. For example, I would have loved to explore further “childcare, a women’s issue.”

**A Support-Supervision Group Is Beneficial for Self-Reflection**

While I, as researcher and facilitator, observed and challenged the women to expand perceptions of bias with relation to their interactions with children, I was challenged at the same time. Emotional awareness of bias was shared and articulated by group members and myself, in the support group and in the written account. All therefore, shared benefits.

Oh yeah, I mean I want to add it to my resume . . . what we said mattered . . . if we could condense it I would love staff to read it . . . assistant teachers, directors.

—Chloe, reunion session

There’s a real ownership for all of us because of the participation . . . a pride in that.

—Katherine, reunion session

The *Anti-Bias Support-Supervision Group* was beneficial for teachers and administrators in a number of ways: support for self-reflection,
heightened awareness of bias and prejudice, understanding connections between the personal and professional, strengthening of self-understanding and confidence, and positive changes in behaviors toward children. Teachers treat children as they are treated (Katz 1993). In that case, if we want teachers to treat children fairly, to listen to, to accept, and to enhance their self-identity, supervisors and educators must do the same for teachers. Some form of support for in-depth, compassionate co-reflection about bias and emotional awareness is necessary for fundamental change in attitudes and acceptance of diversity.

In-depth self-reflection is uncomfortable at times. People dropped out of the support-supervision group for that reason. Espinosa identifies self-reflection as an important quality, which separates great leaders from opportunistic leaders (1997). Self-reflection is not always an easy or comfortable experience. According to Espinosa, it is a struggle at times and a

willingness to engage in the daily struggle of confronting one’s limitations and investing in character development . . . those who become respected leaders over time embody these personal qualities that are born of struggle, self-knowledge, and personal development. (Espinosa 1997, 98–99)

In her interview, Simcha suggested that early childhood student teachers would benefit from a support group that would challenge their perceptions of bias. There are, in fact, some programs that integrate emotional awareness into the curriculum for undergraduate and graduate student teachers in early education. From conversations with teacher-educators about programs at Bank Street, Pacific Oaks, Wheelock College, and the Erikson Institute, it was clear that self-reflection and emotional awareness is an integral part of the curriculum for developing teachers (Garbarino 1997, Derman-Sparks 1992, Ayers 1992).

Resolving issues of bias is a process, and teachers benefit from ongoing support for self-reflection. Length of time is worthy of further thought: Would they need support-supervision indefinitely or for specific periods of time? Six months or a year might be enough for teachers to develop skills needed to change old attitudes and perceptions. In pre- or in-service teacher education, cost effectiveness is often
an issue. However, how high is the price when we neglect this area of staff development?

At a lecture about multiple intelligence theory, Howard Gardner said that schools do not have to be the way we remember them (1993). We need to consider how we are helping teachers understand their own emotions so that they will be able to create environments different from what they remember. My study certainly did not solve the problems of bias, nor give all the answers about self-reflection and awareness. However, it did broaden perspectives and supported teachers in making some changes in their personal and professional lives. All the women were encouraged to think about ways in which to implement an anti-bias curriculum, and some actively introduced discussion and materials in their classrooms and centers. Some felt strengthened enough to think in terms of becoming activists.

Actually, I think one of the most helpful things was it helped me build trust in other people. Because we talked about some very personal and painful things. And we were able to be honest with each other and sometimes disagree and there was even anger expressed. But at the end, everyone still respected and treated each other with respect . . . I think it is helpful in anti-bias. It is not directly related but I think getting through any bias the trust issue is what’s important.

—Katherine
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