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# A Formative Study on Teacher Practice for Students with Emotional-Behaviour Problems

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**E**motional-behaviour problems (EBP) of young children are frequent and serious (Conway, 2005; Kauffman, 2005). They have detrimental long-term effects on these children, their families, and society in general. Young children need early intervention in order to avert a path towards juvenile delinquency, antisocial behaviour, and underachievement in learning (Loeber & Farrington, 2001; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). Currently, the Queensland education system does not view EBP as a disabling condition and does not provide specific support to this student group, their teachers, and their families. Although American research has been conducted into teachers' practices in this field, there has been little research in Queensland or, more broadly, Australia. Specialised settings to cater for the needs of these students, however, are beginning to emerge in Queensland. A study of two teachers working in one specialised setting explored their respective understandings of their practice with two young children. A series of four interviews examined the history of their practice (past, current, emerging, and prospective). Differences in the practices of these teachers provide a basis for some tentative recommendations.

## **Support for emotional behaviour problems**

It is widely recognised that children with EBP do not receive appropriate educational support (Kauffman, 2005). One major set of contributing factors to the lack of organised response to children with EBP in western education is confusion about definition; problems in measuring constructs of social and emotional functioning that are more abstract than more typical educational constructs of learning, achievement, and intelligence; and the inconsistencies between external diagnosis and internal eligibility for specialised services (Toffalo & Pederson, 2005). Within Australia, the local policy environment at national and state levels has not fostered a proactive educational response to this chronic ongoing issue for effective teacher practice and successful student development.

International research has indicated that teachers are often unable to include these students in classroom activities and often harbour negative attitudes towards them (Blake, 2005; Mavropoulou & Padelidu, 2002; Richardson & Shupe, 2003). Lack of teacher understanding of EBP and lack of formal training on how to deal with EBP, therefore, can exacerbate teachers' feelings of stress and inability to experience success with these children. Yet, the relatively high frequency of EBP means that every

classroom teacher will be in contact with these children (Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

EBP are characterised by inappropriate and frequently occurring behaviours that often inhibit learning and relationships (Coleman & Webber, 2002; Conway, 2005; Rogers, 2004). Children with EBP often exhibit severe problem behaviour, either or both internalising (e.g., withdrawal) and externalising (e.g., defiance) in nature. If effective early intervention support is not provided at a young age (i.e., before age 8), then longitudinal and clinical studies have shown that a large number of children will inadvertently follow a path leading towards juvenile delinquency (Loeber & Farrington, 2001; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). An Australian national survey of the mental health of young people in Australia identified 14% of children in the clinical range on the Total Problems Scale on the Child Behaviour Checklist (Sawyer et al., 2000). Realistic international estimates have established that 3-6% of primary school children have a severe form of EBP (Kauffman, 2005). This estimate would translate into at least one or two students in every class.

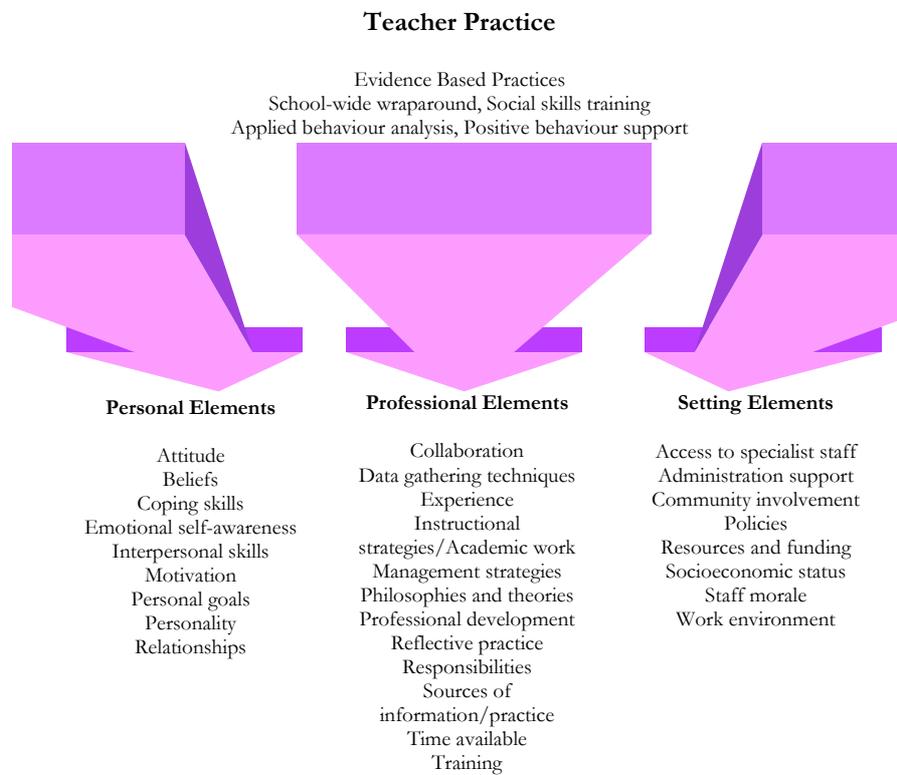
To date, Education Queensland has not defined or otherwise formally recognised EBP in its schools. Hence, Education Queensland does not currently view EBP as an identified condition that can be profiled (with the exception of autism) and intensively supported. There are some vague policies referring to school and administrative support for this student population (Education Queensland, 1998; Education Queensland 2000). However, lack of support and funding inhibits opportunity to meaningfully address these systemic responsibilities for quality educational experiences. Some funding has been allocated towards managing behaviour at a district or regional level. Variation in funding and allocation of funding across a region means that some children will never receive necessary support (Bryer, Holbeck, & Jones, 2004).

Some specialist centres for behaviour management have been established with this funding. One Queensland district decision to target students in the P-3 range of grades has resulted in the establishment of an alternative education centre (AEC). Some trial centres have been operating with state funding from the Queensland government. Trial centres catering for the needs of students between the ages of 10 and 15 have been supported with specific state funding (Currie, 2000). Research has indicated that intervention capacity to diffuse problems is lower for older students, but most efforts to intervene are delivered to older students whose problems have become more complex. Because problems that begin through early childhood often stabilise and escalate (Walker et al., 2004), early intervention is important.

#### **Evidence based practices for EBP**

The research base of successful practices has been firmly established in the USA and the UK for intervening with these young students with EBP (Gimpel & Holland, 2003). This research has built on an array of concepts relating to applied behaviour analysis, social skills training, positive behaviour support, and school-wide wraparound (Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002; Myaard, Crawford, Jackson, & Alessi, 2000; Walker, Kavanagh, Stiller, Golly, Severson, & Feil, 1998). Much of this research has articulated the need for teacher practices to be positive, intense, and consistently carried out over a period of time.

The evidence based practice literature has also identified a suite of elements that can either enhance or impede implementation of particular practices (i.e., professional elements). These influences were related to individual differences among teachers (i.e., personal elements) and setting characteristics (i.e., setting elements). Figure 1 presents a framework that illustrates the complexity of these elements. These elements are further exacerbated by the lack of "research culture" in conjunction with increased workload, stress, and public scrutiny on the teaching profession as a whole (Fullan, 1997).



**Figure 1.**  
Elements of teacher practice.

**Aims of the study**

Extensive international literature on prevalence and recommended teacher practice for students with EBP has been published. Yet, there is little evidence about actual enacted practice in Queensland. The aim of this study was to document actual teacher practice for young students with EBP. In particular, examination of teacher practice in one AEC

was concerned with the development of practice over time, from previous to prospective practice. Documentation of this teacher practice provides a platform for future research about teacher practice employed for students with EBP.

### **Methodology**

Semistructured interview was the primary data gathering strategy used to gain a greater understanding of teacher practice for young children with EBP. Because a single-site case study enabled exploration of a wealth of information on the nature of teacher practice for a child with EBP, it was deemed the most appropriate method of data collection (Bratlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Neuman, 2003; Phares, 2003).

### **Site and participants**

The chosen site was an AEC dedicated to meeting the behavioural needs of students in primary school (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). At the time of the study, three girls and nine boys attended the centre. Duration of children's withdrawal into the AEC averaged 3 months but varied depending on need and ease of re-integration into previous classes.

Teachers working at the AEC were approached because only teachers experienced in the field of special education were offered positions at the centre (Dooley, 1995). Two of the three teachers expressed clear interest in sharing their intervention experiences and the development of their practice (i.e., previous, current, emerging, and prospective). These two teachers were interviewed about their practice with a focus child in order to explore the developmental construction of that practice along a timeline (Beamish, 2004).

### **Interview design**

Four interviews were designed to explore practice development (see Appendix A). Piloting of all interviews with the coordinator of the AEC confirmed that the sequence of items flowed naturally from question to question. The first three interviews had a typical semistructured approach. The final interview differed from the typical semistructured approach and focussed on reflections about one's own practice, combined discussion of issues raised, and summative thoughts and feelings about future direction.

Items were drawn from evidence based literature about behaviour management practices, theories and philosophies, academic learning, skill learning, assessment gathering procedures, emotional self-awareness, collaboration, monitoring and evaluating of practice, and reasons why teachers experiment with or adopt certain practices (Walker et al., 2004). Items were carefully tailored to suit the specific practice phase. Openended questions and corresponding probes facilitated richly detailed responses (Neuman, 2003).

### **Data analysis**

The researcher, using Dragon Naturally Speaking Software 8, simultaneously transcribed recordings of interviews into individual Microsoft Word files. That is, the researcher "re-spoke" the audiotaped record of the teacher's verbal responses, and the Dragon software generated a text file that was then edited.

Textual interview data were analysed in order to identify and examine the relationships between frequently occurring words in their holistic text environment using the computer program *Leximancer 2.2* (Smith, 2005). That is, the Leximancer program was able to automatically complete both open and axial coding of textual interview data by providing a comprehensive overview of the main themes (open coding) and their respective relationships (axial coding) within the holistic text environment (Dey, 1999). Leximancer converts natural language into semantic patterns that are displayed in word frequency lists and 2-dimensional concept maps.

Recommended guidelines for interpreting concept maps were applied (Smith & Humphreys, 2005). Higher frequency words were displayed on a map with brighter and larger dots. Words with stronger relationships (i.e., spoken about in same text segments) were positioned more closely to each other. Words central to the text were generally more central to the map. Clusters of related words were grouped in thematic circles. Nonconsequential words were deleted (i.e., "I suppose"), and like-meaning words were merged (i.e., "kid" and "child"). Filename tags were applied when analysing multiple documents to identify differing content in documents.

Teachers' text was analysed systematically, starting with the entire text for both teachers across all interview phases (i.e., combined) and moving to deconstructed component aspects of teacher text. Table 1 presents a numbered catalogue of text files for combined and individual interviews. Numbering, which started with "1" for the entire corpus of text, shows that 15 base Leximancer maps were created. Leximancer filename tags were most suitable for use in the first concept map of both teachers' entire text. Table 2 displays frequently occurring words identified in respective content analyses, in order to provide greater insight into each teacher's practice development (see Table 2).

**Table 1**  
Numbering system used for Leximancer content analysis of interviews

INTERVIEW	COMBINED	TEACHER A	TEACHER B
All	1	2	3
Sequence			
1. Previous Practice	4	5	6
2. Current Practice	7	8	9
3. Emerging Practice	10	11	12
4a. Prereflection	-	↓	↓
4b. Discussion	13	14	15
4c. Postreflection	-	↑	↑

A Formative Study on Teacher Practice for Students with Emotional-Behaviour Problems

	ALL	PREVIOUS PRACTICE	CURRENT PRACTICE	EMERGING PRACTICE	PROSPECTIVE PRACTICE
COMBINED	Words: 48, 010 Time: 321:47 High Frequency Words kids 240 behaviour 155, kid 110, work 109, time 104, learning 83, teachers 73, school 73, skills 73	Words: 11, 850 Time: 85:11 High Frequency Words kids 66 behaviour 52, time 27, teachers 21, level 20, child 19, people 19, work 17, teaching 17 level 24	Words: 14, 473 Time: 103:59 High Frequency Words behaviour 56, kids 53, kid 48, work 36, time 32, school 29, classroom 28, skills 27, level 24	Words: 14, 445 Time: 97:46 High Frequency Words kids 55 learning 37, behaviour 34, time 32, work 28, skills 26, find 21, teacher 21	Words: 4, 836 Time: 28:58 High Frequency Words think 37 kids 20, teachers 14, work 14, special 14, people 12, learning 12, time 10
	Words: 22, 117 Time: 157:39 High Frequency Words kids 116 behaviour 98, work 64, time 53, learning 50, child 47, skills 47, classroom 40, find 40	Words: 5, 731 Time: 47:28 High Frequency Words kids 35 behaviour 25, teachers 20, kid 17, time 14, work 14, support 11, find 11, skills 11	Words: 6, 752 Time: 50:57 High Frequency Words behaviour 30 kids 20, work 20, skills 19, child 18, time 17, classroom 17, level 14	Words: 7, 434 Time: 53:42 High Frequency Words behaviour 30, learning 28, kids 27 work 18, time 18, skills 17, find 17, level 14	Words: 2, 200 Time: 14:21 High Frequency Words think 19, work 10, special 9, regular 9, teachers 8, kids 7
TEACHER A	Words: 25, 893 Time: 164:08 High Frequency Words kids 122 behaviour 56, time 51, school 49, kid 45, work 45, people 42, change 40	Words: 6, 119 Time: 37:43 High Frequency Words kids 31 behaviour 24, level 13, job 12, people 12, time 11, kid 10	Words: 7, 721 Time: 53:02 High Frequency Words kids 35 kid 30, behaviour 25, school 23, work 17, time 15, change 13	Words: 7, 011 Time: 44:04 High Frequency Words kids 28 practice 18, time 15, school 14, change 12, learning 11, work 10	Words: 5, 042 Time: 23:19 High Frequency Words think 38 kids 23, work 14, teachers 13, job 11, people 10, time 9, special 9
TEACHER B					

**Table 2**  
Higher frequency words identified by Leximancer

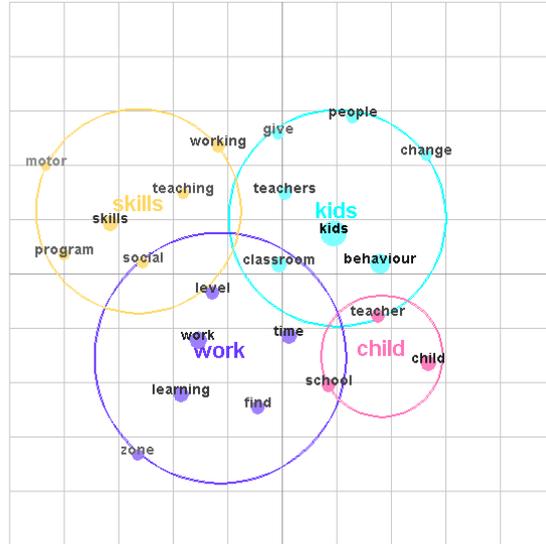
## Results

Figure 2 showed that, in the combined teacher text, the two teachers most frequently spoke about "kids" and their "behaviour" within the context of the "classroom" and in close relation to other "people" (generally mainstream teachers). The less frequent word "give" was spoken about in reference to strategies where kid's behaviour was rewarded using either teacher praise or tangible incentives. The word "change" was spoken about more generally in relation to change in kid's behaviour, how people change, and change in teaching strategies. "Skills" was frequently spoken about in the context of teaching "social" skills "programs" and "motor" skills. "Work" was often spoken about in a range of differing contexts (i.e., finding work to suit the child's level, learning to do different types of work, whether or not a strategy will work). The smaller theme of "child" (i.e., rather than that of kids) represents examples that the teachers gave of working with a particular child, that child's "school," and that child's "teacher."

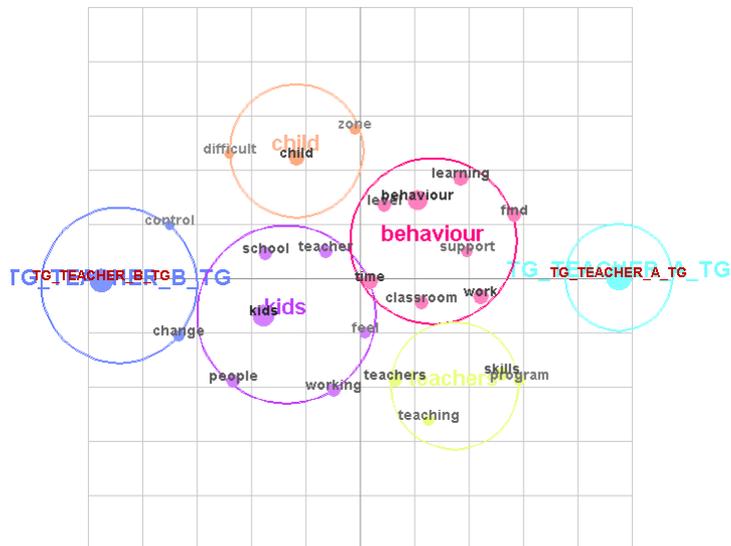
The teachers often spoke about "time." On closer inspection of text passages involving time, it was recognised that the meaning of time needed to be interpreted in a variety of ways (i.e., time out, time away, one step at a time, a certain point in time, finding time to do things). Overlapping theme boundaries indicated that the identified words were integrated throughout the teachers' text. The more outerlying word "zone" was often used to talk about a specific teaching strategy that was related to different feelings and behaviour (i.e., comfort zone, learning zone, and danger zone). Overall, this concept map revealed that the main focus (i.e., theme) of the teachers' practice was the kids and their behaviour. The teachers taught the kids different levels of work along with social and motor skills programs.

The use of filename tags in Figure 3 showed differing emphases in each teacher's practice. Teacher A spoke more frequently about teaching "skills" and different issues related to "behaviour" (i.e., finding triggers of behaviour, level of behaviour, support for behaviour, learning about behaviour, and behaviour management strategies). Teacher B spoke more frequently about "kids" and in relation to working with other "people" and other "teachers." Teacher B spoke more frequently about "change" (i.e., change of practice, enjoying change) and "control" (i.e., control over own behaviour, controlling a situation). Teacher B also spoke more frequently about a "child" and used the word "difficult" to describe situations and behaviour. Therefore, closer inspection of teacher text indicates that Teacher A's practice focused more on behavioural needs and on skill building while Teacher B's practice focussed more on interactions with other people (mainly kids) and how those interactions change.

Data in Table 2 indicated that, overall, both teachers spoke for similar amounts of time, with Teacher B speaking for slightly longer and with a higher word count. Although this table condensed the gathered data, it provided an overview of the focus of interview. Overall results in the table confirmed and expanded results obtained from the concept maps. Table 2 showed that Teacher B spoke largely about kids and only moderately about other subjects. It also showed that Teacher A's text differed in that it had a partial twinned focus on kids and their behaviour. Combined teachers' focus for particular interviews showed some progression through the timeline sequence from previous to prospective practice.



**Figure 2.**  
Leximancer map of complete teacher text.



**Figure 3.**  
Leximancer map of complete teacher text with filename tags.

The first interview was about professional and personal elements. That is, the teachers spoke about people and strategies because the interview was focused on practice history. The second interview ranged across all three professional, personal, and setting elements. That is, the teachers spoke about people, places, and strategies because they were sharing details about their current work. The third interview emphasised professional elements. That is, the teachers spoke mainly about emerging strategies with which they were experimenting. The final interview emphasised personal elements. That is, the teachers chose to personalise their discussion about their future aspirations as teachers in the field of EBP.

## **Discussion**

Overall, these results indicated that both teachers were using some aspects of a variety of evidence based practices. For example, the teachers spoke about finding reasons and triggers for problem behaviours and using positive and reactive strategies such as incentives (i.e., rewards) and consequential strategies to modify behaviour. There was a strong emphasis on teaching social and motor skills and on providing opportunities for children to practise these skills. The teachers spoke about support that they were getting from other professionals. The teachers also spoke about support that they were providing to parents and to other teachers. In general, these teachers used a collection of practices that they moulded to suit their present workplace demands in the AEC. Thus, interviews revealed that their everyday practice at the AEC was not guided by any one cluster of evidence based practices. Rather, they relied on a variety of ideas and practices from different sources that had been woven together incrementally and in a piecemeal fashion as they developed their practice over time.

An interesting issue was related to the emphasis that the teachers placed on interactions with people and how those interactions affected their practice. This emphasis became particularly apparent in the final interview. Social interactions characterise the teaching profession. Both teachers mentioned a need for teachers working with these children to be either the right "kind" of person or have the right "personality." However, such ideas contrast with the most recent recommendations for formal teacher training in EBP practice (Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Hardman, 2004).

## **Future recommendations**

Further research on teacher practice for students with EBP is needed in Queensland. This exploratory study demonstrated that teachers working intensively with students with EBP are drawing casually on recommended practice. A larger sampling of teacher practice in the EBP area is needed to further understand current practice so that guidelines for teachers in the field can be formulated and so that universities can establish appropriate training programs. As EBP is relevant to all mainstream teachers, there is a need for mainstream teachers to participate in training about EBP.

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## Appendix A

### Interview phase and item content

Interview Phase	Item Content
1a. Background information	1. Why did you first want to become a teacher?
	2. Tell me about how you became a teacher.
	3. What areas of education are you most interested in?
	4. Which professional development courses did you personally find most enjoyable? Why?
	5. What kinds of professional development have you found professionally most useful? Why?
	6. How did you find out about the AEC?
	7. Why were you "inspired" to work at the AEC?
	8. Overall, how did you feel when you came to the AEC?
	9. With your students with emotional-behaviour problems, who have you previously collaborated with?
	10. Is there anything else that you would like to share?
1b. Previous practice	1. Prior to coming to the AEC, from what theories or philosophies did you draw your behaviour management strategies?
	2. How would you describe your previous behaviour management practice for the whole class, small groups, and individuals?
	3. Prior to coming to the AEC, what approaches/practices have you used to work with students whose behaviour in the classroom was noncompliant, aggressive, and withdrawn or anxious?
	4. How did you come to find out about this particular approach or practice?
	5. Prior to coming to the AEC, which of these approaches/practices did you find most successful?
	6. Which elements of your previous practice do you still enjoy using and find very effective?
	7. Reflecting back, are there any previous practices that perhaps you may regret using?
	8. Prior to coming to the AEC, how did you feel about your teaching and your students with emotional-behaviour problems?
	9. Prior to coming to the AEC, with whom did you collaborate when working with students who have emotional-behaviour problems?
	10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your previous practice?
2. Current practice	1. Tell me about your current whole-of-class/group behaviour management plan.
	2. What checklists, observations, or more formal measures (e.g. tests) did you use to gather information about your student when he first came to the centre?
	3. How do you continue to gather information about your student's behaviour at the centre?
	4. Tell me about the individual behaviour management plan that you have for your student.
	5. What specific skills does your student need to learn?
	6. What academic skills are important for your student to learn at the moment?
	7. Do you evaluate or monitor your current practice?
	8. How do you currently feel about your teaching and your student with emotional-behaviour problems?
	9. With your student with emotional-behaviour problems, who are you currently collaborating with?
	10. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your current practice?

Stimulating the "Action" as Participants in Participatory Research

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Interview Phase	Item Content
3. Emerging practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What practices are you currently experimenting with?</li> <li>2. Are you exploring any new practices to gather baseline data, monitor progress, or evaluate progress of students?</li> <li>3. Are you considering other strategies or approaches to specifically manage this student's individual behaviour?</li> <li>4. Are you considering other strategies or approaches to assist your student with his academic learning across the curriculum or in any specific curriculum area?</li> <li>5. Are you considering any different whole-of-class/group behaviour management strategies?</li> <li>6. Let's step back from specific practices. Overall, how do you feel about your practice base and how its changing?</li> <li>7. What drives you to review/change/adopt differing strategies or approaches?</li> <li>8. Overall, how do you feel about new/differing ways you are interacting with the students?</li> <li>9. With your student with emotional-behaviour problems, who are you beginning to collaborate with?</li> <li>10. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your emerging practice?</li> </ol>
4. Prospective practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reflection: Personal thoughts and feelings about practice prompted by a revisit of interview snippets.</li> <li>2. Discussion: Discussion of issues prompted by listening to each other's personal reflections.</li> <li>3. Reflection: Personal thoughts and feelings prompted by the question, "Where to from here?"</li> </ol>

