ENCOUNTERS WITH PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION: UTILISING GROUP DEBRIEF SESSIONS TO CONTAIN STUDENT TEACHERS' ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

Teaching experience – in face-to-face, online, and blended educational contexts – provides student teachers with the opportunity to participate in low, mid, and high-resourced schools, in preparation for their integration into the South African educational system. Often, while at low-resource schools, student teachers report feeling ineffectual, frustrated, despondent, and overwhelmed, leading to criticism of the programme, requests to transfer to high-resource alternatives, and threats to disengage from teaching experience. Drawing on Klein's concept of projective identification, and Bion's idea of container-contained, we understand such communications as expressions of overwhelming anxiety, highlighting an urgent need for intervention. To address this need, group debrief was incorporated into teaching experience, in an attempt to enable anxiety to be tolerated, worked through, and understood, rather than evacuated defensively via projective identification. Pre- and post-debrief questionnaires were employed to track containment facilitated with fifty (50) final (4th) year student teachers. Though some resistance was expected and noted, the outcomes were largely positive, with most students reporting improved emotional states, reduced anxiety, and feelings of empowerment.

Keywords: anxiety, container/contained, pedagogy of discomfort, projective identification, student teachers, teaching experience, transformation and decolonisation of education.

INTRODUCTION

Student teachers at a private institute of higher education in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, frequently become disgruntled when completing their teaching experience, especially during placement at low-resource schools. Often, they request transfers to high-resource alternatives or threaten to disengage entirely from their teaching experience. We argue that, by understanding the student teachers' acting out as an attempt to evacuate overwhelming anxiety

(Klein 1935; 1946; 1957), there is an opportunity to intervene and contain these difficult feelings, enabling distress to be tolerated and worked through. We believe that such intervention can be a step toward the transformation and decolonisation of education in the Global South, developing critical thinking and self-reflexivity, assisting student teachers grow their professional personas and better understand the social, cultural, and political contexts of education.

At this institute, students enrolled for a Bachelor of Education Degree are required to undertake a teaching experience practical component each year. This is stipulated in the revised *Minimum Requirements of Teacher Education Qualifications Policy* (MRTEQP) published in Government Gazette No. 38487 of 19 February 2015. As a result, final (4^{th}) year student teachers at the institute have eight weeks of teaching experience spilt into a block of three weeks in their first semester and five weeks during their second semester. During teaching experience student teachers are encouraged to learn from a mentor teacher, practice their teaching skills, and become familiar with the landscape of education in South Africa. The schools in which student teachers are placed are categorised as low, mid, and high-resource. Student teachers are offered a balance in terms of which category of school they are assigned. However, they are required to gain experience in all three resource levels before their degree can be deemed complete. High-resource schools are often privatised, with learners who come from financially secure, or privileged, backgrounds. Low-resource school are typically government-funded with overcrowded classrooms, minimal assets, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, mid-resource schools fall between these two socio-economic extremes.

Given the complex historical legacy of apartheid and the compound socio-political and economic realities currently faced by South Africans, during teaching experience student teachers can be exposed to learners and staff who are facing a wide range of socio-political, economic, environmental, physical, and psychological challenges, especially in low-resource schools. This can lead to working environments which are often filled with strong emotions, including aggression, rage, despair, and hopelessness. Exposure to such intense and complex human emotions can evoke disturbing and confusing feelings within student teachers. This can be disempowering as, developmentally, student teachers have their own need for affirmation and containment, especially during the initial stages of forming a professional persona.

Being overwhelmed with anxiety during this key developmental stage can lead student teachers to struggle to find meaning in their teaching experience, and in their relationships with learners, peers, staff, and significant others. There is a strong likelihood that student teachers will either disengage or act out in some other way, becoming frightened or fatigued, with the corresponding unconscious defensive manoeuvres this evokes. For example, one student

teacher who was asked to assist with administration duties at a low-resource school felt robbed of what she described as a "proper teaching experience". This resulted in her returning to campus to complain about her mentor teacher, claiming that she was treated unfairly, and that the institute was not providing her with the teaching experience owed to her. Other student teachers have reported being confronted with racist comments or sexist behaviours and have returned to campus with similar complaints and requests to transfer to high-resource schools.

As student teachers spend their days working with children, they often see the intersectional effects of poverty, racism, sexism, exploitation, and other difficult life circumstances. In the words of another student teacher, learners who are experiencing socially, economically, physically, and psychologically challenging circumstances are "... often physically destructive and unruly. When I engage with them in the classroom, they make me feel scared and sad." Helping student teachers make important, appropriate, and constructive adjustments in response to such sombre life experiences provides a difficult, yet important, learning opportunity for those working in diverse contexts. Finding ways of containing student teachers' overwhelming anxiety is key to their ability to deal with enactments of trauma, abuse, and loss in the classroom. The same student teacher explained during one group debrief session: "Teaching gives us a window into the best and worst of human nature: we need to acknowledge that". We – as educators, clinicians, and researchers – believe that support for student teachers is, therefore, necessary in order for such emotional experience to be apprehended and transformed. Whilst student teachers may view their distressing emotional experiences as a reflection of an unproductive course, we view these emotional experiences as crucial to their learning, as well as their personal and professional development, as long as such distress is effectively and comprehensively engaged with. We argue that this stance is enabled through a pedagogy of discomfort.

As a proponent of the pedagogy of discomfort, Zembylas (2015) argues that traditional views of emotional expression in teaching and learning spaces are limiting. Breaking from tradition and following Zembylas, teaching, learning, and emotion no longer need to be conceptualised as belonging in separate arenas or as being incompatible with student teaching experience. We do, however, need to be cognisant of what happens psychologically when learning and strong emotions merge in the face of difficult socio-political and economic realities, such as teaching experience in low resource schools. Unfortunately, up until this point, traditional Western philosophical assumptions related to psychopathology have tended to limit and shape the range of support structures available to those in need (Auld 2022a; Auld and Cartwright 2018). These assumptions encourage people to think about themselves as separate from their social group, give priority to objectivity over subjectivity, and value rationality over

emotionality (Auld 2022a). They foster a pessimistic attitude and treat people as if they are passive objects, acted upon by outside forces rather than proactive agents engaged in meaningful action (Boyle 2022). Substantiating this point, Haraway (1988), argues against a disembodied subjectivity, removed from socio-political context, toward the embodied subjectivity and awareness of how knowledge is situated. Drawing on Haraway's insight, in this article we offer an alternative, and more nuanced, understanding of student teachers' acting-out behaviour – one that sutures the inner and outer worlds of student subjectivity – opening the door to more inclusive understanding and far-reaching support.

To explore how to more effectively support student teachers during the development of their professional personas we begin with a discussion of the role of the pedagogy of discomfort in teaching experience, followed by a review of Klein's (1957) concept of projective identification and Bion's (1962) notion of container-contained. Next, we put forward group debrief as a possible means of acknowledging and supporting student teachers' overwhelming anxiety at this key developmental stage in their education. We then describe a procedure to integrate group debrief into teaching experience. Finally, we evaluate the effectiveness of this approach to supporting student teacher anxiety through an analysis of pre- and post-debrief questionnaires.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF A PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT

Higher education in both the Global North and Global South continues to both support and perpetuate colonial relations and practices (Kerr 2014). Given the importance of the decolonial agenda, an examination of the limitations and biases of contemporary educational curricula, as well as gaps in student teacher training, are at the forefront of scholarly research attempting to facilitate the metamorphosis of the socio-political legacies of colonialism and its influence on educational policies.

Kerr (2014, 101) brings an important issue to the fore, namely, that the ideological underpinning of current educational strategies and policies encourage student teachers to unquestioningly take up privilege and resist acknowledging the violence and marginalisation that is the lived reality of many globally. To counter this, Kerr proposes that student teachers need to engage in the critical practice of questioning their own world view in order to acknowledge the material and discursive aspects of the context in which they are positioned. Going further, she points out that such critical reflection needs to be an ethical requirement for any teacher anywhere.

With reflective engagement, as with any learning experience, some anxiety, discomfort,

and disquiet may be inevitable. To elaborate, acknowledging and exploring the embedded sociocultural, economic, and political dimensions which frame and shape our understandings, while fostering critical rigor (Davis and Steyn 2012), requires student teachers to step outside of their comfort zones in order to review their beliefs and assumptions (Boler 1999). Such distress in the classroom (be it face-to-face, online, or blended) may initially appear to be at odds with the assertion that the classroom should be a "safe space". However, Boostrom (1998) and Zembylas (2015), amongst others, point out that a safe educational space does not necessarily mean that it should (or can) be free from distress.

Building on this, one of the ways in which we can theoretically frame the purpose of teaching experience as part of the Bachelor of Education degree, is through the lens of the pedagogy of discomfort. A pedagogy of discomfort is an approach to teaching and learning that guides student teachers to stretch beyond their comfort zones and to move past previously taken for granted assumptions, beliefs, and habits. By doing so student teachers are impelled to question and interrogate their pre-existing beliefs, moving them to a deeper level of understanding in their learning experience (Boler 1999).

Teaching experience can be considered – within the framework of a pedagogy of discomfort – as a physical, cognitive, and emotional shift that requires student teachers to leave behind pre-established beliefs and ideas about what education in South Africa really looks and feels like. This is especially pertinent if the student teacher's own schooling has been within a privileged environment. Teaching experience also compels student teachers to confront the intersectionality of race, economic status, gender, class, ethnicity, and religion, and to understand education in South Africa as a product, but also producer, of these complex dynamics. Teaching experience also prompts student teachers to turn their attention inward, to reflect on their own strengths, blind spots, prejudices and, perhaps, unhelpful or unproductive beliefs.

The role of the pedagogy of discomfort has been described as important in the context of transformation (Nolan and Molla 2018). In South Africa, transformation has been at the forefront of the academic agenda since the release of the *Green paper on higher education transformation* (Council on Higher Education1996) and the *Educational white paper* (South African Government 1997). These papers legislate for injustices imposed during and after the apartheid period to be redressed within higher education structures and practices. A pedagogy of discomfort can be effective in this context as it invites student teachers to interrogate their multi-layered identities and to problematise the roles those identities play in social injustices within their professional environments. However, as Thompson (2003) points out, when student teachers are prompted to interrogate assumptions and beliefs that have been taken-for-

granted for some time, they are often left unsettled to a point where they may feel that their identity has come under threat. As a result of this, as we will explicate later, unconscious defensive strategies, such as projective identification, may be employed in an attempt to defend against overwhelming anxiety. The outward expression of this unconscious defensive move often looks like complaints by student teachers to the institute about their teaching experience, with little or no self-reflection on the true source of the complaint – the difficulties leaving behind pre-established beliefs and ideas about what education in South Africa really looks and feels like.

As Nolan and Molla (2018) explain, the ability to become aware of and critically reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions and values underpinning experiences – along with our understanding of those experiences and the interpretations placed upon them – is essential for turning experience into learning opportunities. One of the key questions guiding our research, therefore, is, "If student teachers have not fully developed the skill of critical reflection, might we be able to develop this through guided debrief groups?" Perhaps student teachers do, in fact, possess the capacity to do so (having made it this far in their academic careers) but have not been called upon to use it in the ways that teaching experience demands of them. Added to this, other key questions include, "Is overwhelming anxiety being left uncontained, interfering with student teachers' ability to critically reflect, learn, and grow from teaching experience?", and, "Can participation in a debrief group assist in containment and the development of critical reflection?" We employ the psychoanalytic concept of projective identification to explore these questions further.

PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION AND THE CONTAINER-CONTAINED RELATIONSHIP

Looking at anxiety, distress, and discomfort from a psychoanalytic perspective, projective identification is a term derived from the work of child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1935; 1946; 1957). Klein believes that to cope with overwhelming and distressing sensory experience, emotions, or desires, a child projects these aspects of the self *into* someone else in order to reduce their anxiety. Initially, this might be a child's caretaker. The caretaker then experiences the projected aspects unconsciously *as if* they were their own. In other words, the child unconsciously pressures the caretaker to experience these anxiety provoking and distressing aspects, and to identify with these features. This process is like giving raw materials to the caretaker for them to refine and process before being given back as a finished product to the child.

Klein's seminal ideas have been developed further, especially by Bion (1959; 1962),

Kernberg (2018), Ogden (2018), and Spillius (2014), amongst others. Drawing from Bion's (1959) work on group psychology within a marriage, interpersonal tension can be viewed as being informed by a couple's failure to contain anxiety. As a result, intrapsychic issues may be externalised and acted out in the relationship (Nathans and Schaefer 2017). If, drawing on Nielsen (2019, 594), projective identification can be viewed, first and foremost, as an interpersonal defense mechanism, then one person (the "inducer") uses others ("recipients") to help them endure painful intrapsychic states of mind. Inducers engage in the process of projective identification in two ways: *firstly*, through projection (transference) and, *secondly,* through behaviours likely to induce actions consistent with that projection in others (Ogden 2018; Sandler 1993). Applying this understanding to marital discord, a spouse (recipient) may assimilate what has been projected by their partner (inducer) and then behave in a corresponding manner. Inducers, however, remain resistant to attempts to alter their opinions and incitements. Nielsen (2019, 595) refers to this phenomenon as "tenacious relegation of the projected representations or roles" and relates it to the tendency of the inducer to continue to protest, reiterate, and escalate their convictions/provocations within the marriage. Projective identification, therefore, goes beyond transference when one spouse, the recipient of the projection – the distorted perception – is not only misperceived as an unacceptable part of their partner but actually begins to feel and behave accordingly because of intense pressure from their spouse makes them believe they must.

Returning to the relationship between a child and their caretaker, Bion (1962) explains that an empathetic caretaker (recipient), with intact ego functions, can accept, digest, detoxify, and render the content of projective identifications less frightening and more bearable to the child (inducer). Here, by containing the inducer's projective identifications, before transforming them into something more tolerable, the recipient foster's the development of a meaning making relationship. To explain further, via introjection, the inducer, overtime, takes in the model of a "thinking couple", creating a psychic link between caretaker and child. The internalisation of this thinking couple enables the child to gain the ability to tolerate and transform aspects they had previously dealt with by evacuation via projective identification. As Billow (2000) notes, this internalised sense of the thinking couple, or internal container, helps the child acknowledge, tolerate, and transform that which was previously split-off and projected into the caretaker. This leads to reduced anxiety and a sense of meaning and empowerment. In other words, the internalisation of the thinking couple promotes the development of symbols and images which serve the function of containing anxiety and establishing the development of thought and understanding. As a result, thanks to the internalisation of the thinking couple the child is gradually able to contain their own as well as others' emotional experiences, giving meaning

to such experiences, and, therefore, develop, reducing their dependence on external others to contain distressing self-aspects. As Hafsi (2011, 9) notes, being able to tolerate and give meaning to distress is a solution to the avoidance of distress, and is a pre-requisite for mental development, improved emotional states, and feelings of empowerment. A sense of helplessness and feelings of disempowerment are markers of uncontained anxiety, and often lead to unproductive or harmful behaviours.

As projective identification and containment are not confined to childhood, this defensive process can be active throughout life, particularly when faced with helplessness in anxiety-provoking situations. These are precisely the circumstances which may be faced by student teachers engaging with learners and staff in many disenfranchised communities in the Global South. It is our contention that the operation of defensive manoeuvres to avoid overwhelming anxiety can be observed in the relationship between learners/educational staff and student teachers during the teaching experience itself, and, subsequently, in the relationship between the student teachers and their supervisors/lecturers at the training institute. If such overwhelming anxiety (evacuated via projective identification) is left uncontained and unprocessed, however, there is the potential for student teachers to respond in unhelpful ways, including unconsciously rebuffing a learner at a school to protect themselves, or acting out towards their supervisor and lecturers at their tertiary institute, making demands to change their school placement to a high-resource school, or blaming their tertiary institute for exposing them to traumatogenic environments.

If we are to engage seriously with unconscious defensive manoeuvres such as projective identification and subsequent acting out behaviour, then it is important that student teachers are helped to feel contained and supported with the impact of socio-political and economic contexts on their taken-for-granted beliefs and values, as well as the complex emotions they may be exposed to. If supervisors and lecturers ignore or rebuke student teachers acting out behaviour at this vulnerable time, and projections are returned to the student teachers without processing, this can lead to obstruction of the development of the student teachers' professional personas. Returning to Bion's (1962) thoughts on the internalisation of the thinking couple, the institution (as represented by the supervisor and lecturers) would then be unconsciously experienced by the student teachers as not containing or transforming the intolerable aspects of the teaching experience the student teachers are defensively evacuating. This, then, can lead to an unbearable sense of anxiety and distress in the student teacher, and disengagement from the teaching experience may well be the only remaining option. Students who are preparing to become teachers, therefore, should be given the opportunity – and support – to reflect on strong and complex feelings that arise when working within vulnerable communities, in order to improve

their emotional states, reduce their anxiety level, and enable them to feel empowered.

We are not, however, advocating for a teaching experience environment that is completely devoid of anxiety, distress, or discomfort (Boostrom 1998), for as Zembylas (2015) indicates, discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits, and normative practices that sustain social inequalities. Substantiating this point further, Foulcault's (1994) ethic of discomfort emphasise the proactive and transformative potential of uncomfortable feelings and experiences. Given Boostrom (1998), Foucault (2000), and Zembylas' (2015) useful insights into the pedagogy of discomfort, with the promotion of reflective engagement, a transformation and decolonial agenda can be prioritised in teacher training. For, as Zembylas (2015) notes, offering student teachers the opportunity to reflect on the development of their professional personas provides an opportunity to not only explore the taken-for-granted ideological underpinnings of the teaching experience and Bachelor of Education programme, but also the student teachers' own world views and the socio-political context in which they are positioned. This critically reflective process can, therefore, further lead to improved emotional states, reduced anxiety, and feelings of empowerment.

One way of encouraging critical reflection in teacher training is to provide a space where student teachers can engage thoughtfully and self-reflexively with different perspectives and experiences. Returning to Kerr (2014), the provision of such a space is vital in order to enable students to explore how, why, and when they are being limited by their taken-for-granted socio-political worldviews, in both their treatment of self and other. In this way Kerr emphasises the importance of discussing and contemplating the topic of resistance as pedagogically generative and desirable. To support and contain anxiety, distress, and discomfort we put forward group debrief as a critical resource to continued effective engagement with student teacher work experience.

PROCEDURE FOR GROUP DEBRIEF SESSIONS

Group intervention, also known as a debrief, is a structured group discussion. Taking a transformational and decolonial stance and rooting our intervention within the pedagogy of discomfort, the following steps may be used as a guide to facilitate the development of a critical reflective space. Such a space is vital in order to provide containment for student teacher anxiety and increase feelings of personal control and empowerment. It also promotes the exploration of taken-for-granted socio-political norms and values, leading to the examination of how they may contribute toward social injustice in the workplace.

1) Facilitation

To ensure that a reflective space is created where student teachers (participants) feel that their issues and concerns will be heard without sanction, it is important that the facilitator be relatively unknown to the participants. For example, the facilitator could be a clinical or counselling psychologist, social worker, or counsellor.

2) Introduction

To ensure the participants feel secure and respected, the facilitator could explore the following:

- The reason for the group (e.g., student teachers feeling distressed, disillusioned, and overwhelmed by the teaching experience).
- Expectations of the group process in terms of the format and sequence of events.
- Outline the rules for group participation. General rules may include the following:
    - Confidentiality: "What is said in here stays in here".
    - Opportunity to express verbal feelings or not to share.

Often it is helpful to have the participants sit in a circle. An ice breaker may be used, such as throwing a ball to other participants. Here, a participant must choose an emotive word to describe how they feel before throwing the ball to another participant (at random). This activity can then be repeated in a manner that increases the experience of anxiety. For example, the participant must remember and repeat all the emotive words that have been said, before adding their own. The anxiety created in this memory game is experienced and shared by all participants. Any undercurrents that evolve between participants are noted by the facilitator who then explicates these dynamics and any insights gained.

3) Feelings

Once the participants understand that new situations often cause discomfort, discussion can move toward exploring how discomfort relates to learning. The facilitator could:

- Allow each participant an opportunity to share their feelings about their teaching experiences.
- Begin with feelings the participants experienced initially and move to what feelings they have currently.
- Remind the group that it is their job to listen in a supportive and caring manner.

4) Teaching

It is important for the group to learn that it is not unusual to experience differing emotions, even

for student teachers at the same school placement. The facilitator could:

- Provide information regarding the variety of different emotional reactions to overwhelming events, and anticipated reactions.
- Validate personal experiences.
- Provide information regarding further personal counselling support and how to access such resources (e.g., available crisis counsellors, the campus psychologist or counsellor, and private options).

5) Critical reflection

The facilitator encourages the participants to reflect on, and explore, their anxiety and distress in terms of the impact of taken-for-granted socio-political and economic worldviews on subjectivity.

6) Closure

As group interventions can be a very powerful and affirming experience for participants, the facilitator could:

- Allow each participant to summarise or make final comments.
- Develop a plan of action in collaboration with the other participants, for example, agreeing to keep in contact and draw on one another for peer support.

It is essential that the facilitator identify any group participant that may require more intensive support for further follow-up.

METHOD

This study employed an action research design using group debriefs and questionnaires (see Annexure A) to explore perceived shifts in students. We tracked three variables closely to determine the likelihood that the group debrief was effective in providing containment to the participants. This is discussed in further detail below.

The population for this study focused on student teachers registered at a private higher education institute in South Africa. Fifty (50) final (4^{th}) year Bachelor of Education students at this private higher education institute volunteered to participate in the debrief groups offered by the authors. The sample was diverse in terms of race, age, and gender. The only inclusion criteria were that students had completed their first teaching block experience for the year and were currently registered for their final (4^{th}) year of their Bachelor of Education degree. We invited final year students because, by that stage, all students would have been exposed to

high, mid, and low-resourced schools and been exposed to a variety of teaching experiences from which they could draw in their discussions during the debrief. It was also reported by the Bachelor of Education supervisors and lecturers that it was from this year that the majority of complaints were being received, indicating an urgent need for intervention.

Given the debrief groups were held in the first semester after their first block of teaching experience, all student teachers were required to complete one more teaching experience block in the second semester before graduating. Students were recruited through an e-mail invitation sent by the School of Education's Teaching Experience Coordinator. The e-mail was sent to final year student teachers who had just returned from their first block of teaching experience for the year. Days and times were provided to the student teachers, and they were informed that participating in the group was voluntary and had no bearing on their final mark for their course.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data was collected via a questionnaire designed to investigate the emotional states of the students before and after participating in the debrief group (see Annexure A). Both the pre-debrief questionnaire and the post-debrief questionnaire consisted of 7 questions. Each comprised a mix of Likert Scale and yes/no questions. The questionnaires were purposely kept short and easy to complete to avoid provoking further resistance, or feelings of overwhelming anxiety in the student teachers. Three of the questions were designed to test the same variables before and after participating in the debrief group. The remainder of the questions assisted in gathering contextual information surrounding the students' perceptions of the teaching experience and the debrief groups. The three comparative questions are summarised in Table 1. All three questions were constructed using a Likert Scale (1 – 5).

Table 1: Summary of comparative questions in pre- and post-debrief questionnaires

Pre-debrief questionnaire	Post-debrief questionnaire
Q1: Please rate how anxious you felt during your teaching experience 1 = overwhelmed; 5 = calm	Please rate how anxious you now feel about your future teaching experience 1 = overwhelmed; 5 = calm
Q2: Please rate how helpless you felt during your teaching experience 1 = disempowered; 5 = empowered	Please rate how empowered you feel about your future teaching experiences 1 = disempowered; 5 = empowered
Q3: Do you feel that you would benefit from a debriefing session after your teaching experience? 1 = disagree; 5 = agree	Do you feel that you benefitted from engaging in this debriefing? 1 = disagree; 5 = agree

While feeling that the debrief groups were or were not beneficial does not necessarily tell us anything significant about containment, feelings of *anxiety* and *helplessness* can be tracked and explained through the lens of container/contained. Debrief groups were, therefore, assessed for

their effectiveness based on these two core constructs. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The mean pre-test score for each of the three comparative questions was compared with the mean post-test score for each. The differences between the two scores were then calculated and expressed as a percentage. These differences are interpreted in the following section.

RESULTS

The changes in anxiety (Q1), helplessness (Q2) and attitude to the debrief group (Q3) are summarised in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Table 2: Summary of differences in mean scores between pre- and post-debrief questionnaire comparative questions.

	Mean pre-debrief	Mean post-debrief	Difference	Percentage change
Q1	3.24	4.04	0.8	16%
Q2	3.48	4.16	0.68	13.6%
Q3	3.86	4.44	0.58	11.6%

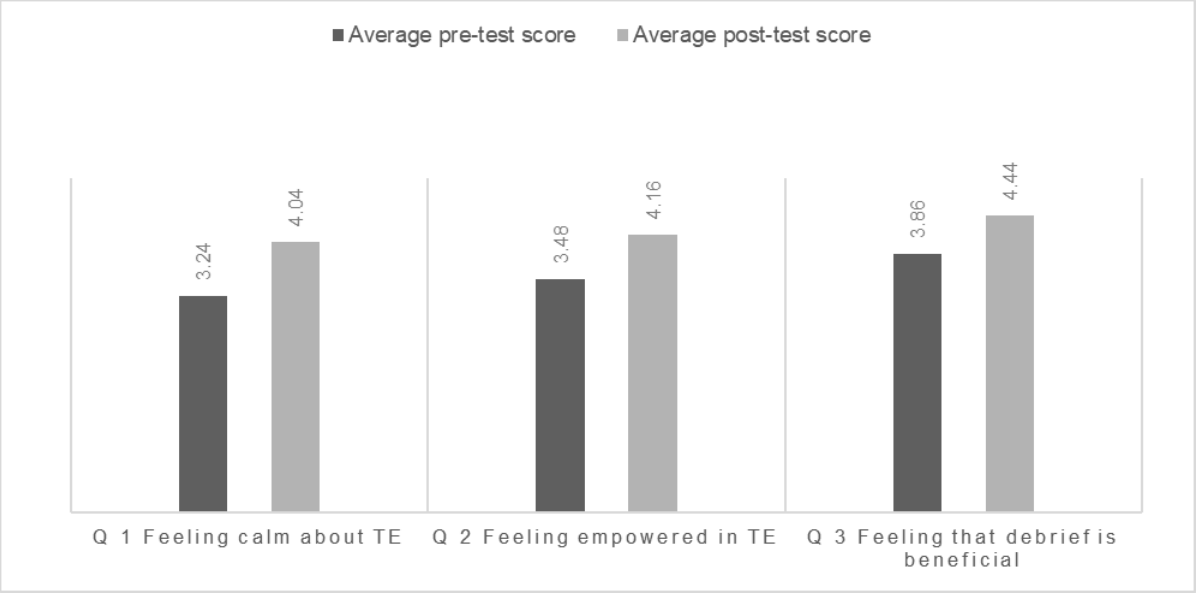

Figure 1: Differences in mean scores of comparative questions pre- and post-debrief

Table 2 and Figure 1 show that the average score for feeling calm in relation to teaching experience (TE) (as opposed to anxious) increased after participation in the group debrief. This indicates that students felt less anxious as a result of the work that was done in the debrief group. This could be understood as an outcome of the student being contained by the group process. The second marker that indicates containment can be seen in the observed increase in feelings

of empowerment after participating in the debrief group. The perceived effects of this containment appeared to be immediately obvious to the participants as we also observed an increase in student teachers reporting that they felt that the debrief groups were beneficial.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that group debrief sessions were beneficial and effective in containing the student teachers' overwhelming distress in relation to their teaching experience. This was evidenced in students' self-reported decrease in feelings of helplessness and anxiety. The authors and the Teaching Experience Coordinator also noted that no further complaints related to teaching experience were received from this cohort of student teachers after the group debrief sessions were offered. As discussed earlier, increased dissatisfaction is a marker of uncontained overwhelming anxiety and helplessness. This has the potential to provoke unconscious defensive manoeuvres, such as projective identification, in student teachers. The outcomes of this are expressed in acting out behaviours such as complaints and threats to disengage from the teaching activity. The aim of the acting out is to provoke feelings of pain, anger, and helplessness in the other (supervisor or lecturer) – hence the communicative aspect of projective identification. However, this ultimately leads to further distress and disempowerment as it prevents the student teachers from completing their Bachelor of Education degrees – given that teaching experience in all three contexts (low, mid, and high-resource schools) is a requirement for successful completion of the degree.

It is important to be clear that the goal of group debrief is not to eradicate or avoid anxiety and discomfort in teaching experience. Anxiety is inevitable, especially during experiential learning activities such as teaching experience within the complex socio-political and economic realities that have been brought to the fore in the twenty-first century. Though anxiety is often experienced as a distressing emotion – and can be harmful, causing students to (unconsciously) act out (Haselau and Saville Young 2022) – it can be utilised and transformed into a productive experience if effectively contained. Effective containment enables processes like critical reflection to be developed, a key ideal outlined in decolonial agendas and calls for transformation. We argue that anxiety and other distressing emotional states are important learning opportunities if understood from a psychoanalytic perspective. Employing a pedagogy of discomfort can highlight ways in which distressing emotional states can be leveraged to produce deep critical reflection and foster the potential for personal change within the student teacher.

A psychoanalytic perspective alongside a pedagogy of discomfort enables us to understand acting out as a behaviour manifestation of an unconscious defensive manoeuvre to

protect against overwhelming anxiety and, therefore, as a form of communication. Containment of overwhelming anxiety (through group debrief sessions) allows emotional experiences to be acknowledged, apprehended, and transformed. We argue that this is a crucial step in personal and professional development for student teachers, in line with arguments made by Nolan and Molla (2018). We also argue that it is useful to understand acting out as not simply a problematic behaviour, but as part of a complex communicative defensive manoeuvre. If we only try to manage student teachers' acting out behaviourally, the problem will persist (see Auld 2022a; Bion 1962; Foulcault 1994; Klein 1935; 1946; 1957). If we understand uncontained anxiety for what it is in this context – overwhelming, and, therefore, a threat to identity – we can meaningfully intervene to contain and reflect on the complex meaning of any problematic acting out that may ensue. In other words, rather than trying to manage acting out behaviours at an institutional level, distressing emotions can be contained at an interpersonal level through group debrief and transformed into a learning opportunity. It is particularly important that distressing emotions are contained in teaching experience contexts, especially in diverse socio-political and economic contexts such as South Africa where the potential for pre-existing racism, sexism, and other inequalities to resurface, or to become more deeply embedded, is ever present.

CONCLUSION

Whilst student teachers may view distressing emotions as a reflection of an unproductive teaching experience, if such distress is effectively and comprehensively engaged with and contained, we, as educators and programme developers, view these emotions as crucial to student teacher learning and development. Not only is containment important in the broader school and institutional context, but it is also our ethical responsibility to contain distressing emotions that we evoke in the design of our curricula. To do this, we must acknowledge the interplay of individual subjectivities with socio-political and economic contexts in higher education, and specifically in teaching experience. The individual is not separate from the learning context, and, therefore, we need to work with acting out behaviour in more complex ways. This stance is enabled through a psychoanalytic perspective and a pedagogy of discomfort.

Current educational strategies and policies in the Global South tend to encourage student teachers to accept privilege and overlook the intersectional effects of poverty, racism, sexism, religion, and other exploitative life circumstances on both themselves and the learners in their charge (Kerr 2014).The role of the pedagogy of discomfort, thus, is vital to the context of the transformation of higher education (Nolan and Molla 2018) as it invites student teachers to interrogate their multi-layered identities, question their own worldviews, and engage critically

with the material and discursive aspects of the context in which they are positioned. An ethic of discomfort (Foucault 2000), therefore, provokes student teachers to not only explore the taken-for-granted ideological underpinnings of their teaching experience and the Bachelor of Education programme itself, but also their own blind spots, prejudices, and unhelpful beliefs.

We have found that the introduction of debrief groups can be a step toward the transformation and decolonisation of education in diverse multicultural contexts, such as those found in the Global South. This is because debrief groups provide a critical reflective space where student teachers can engage thoughtfully and self-reflexively with different perspectives and experiences. The provision of such a critical reflective space is vital in order to enable students to explore how, why, and when they are limited by their taken-for-granted socio-political worldviews (Kerr 2014). In other words, debrief groups allow reflection and engagement with the complexity of race, economic status, gender, and class in relation to both the student teachers', as well as their learners', educational and life opportunities – helping open up the power dynamic set up in traditional colonial educator-student interactions. Approaching difficult life experiences in a professional, sensitive, and responsive manner not only offers student teachers containment for their own overwhelming anxiety, but in so, doing enables student teachers to be better positioned to contain the intersectional impacts of exploitative socio-political contexts on the learners in their charge. Additionally, debrief groups offer the opportunity of helping student teachers gain socio-political and economic insight, combined with the complex interpersonal skills necessary to thrive in diverse contexts.

Importantly, a psychoanalytic perspective alongside a pedagogy of discomfort enables both the individual student teacher, and the debrief group as a whole, to acknowledge and comprehend acting out behaviour as a behavioural manifestation of unconscious defensive manoeuvres. Drawing on Klein's (1946) concept of projective identification, we can understand student teachers dealing with their overwhelming anxiety by, *firstly*, using others (recipients) to help them endure painful intrapsychic states of mind, and, *secondly*, as leading to behaviours likely to induce actions consistent with their projection in others (Ogden 2018; Sandler 1993). Informed by Bion's (1962) idea of container-contained, debrief groups present the opportunity of a transformational learning experience, as well as personal and professional growth, helping facilitate the internalisation of the thinking couple (or, in this case, "thinking group") as part of student teacher development. This internalised sense of the thinking couple/group can help student teachers acknowledge, tolerate, and transform that which they previously split-off and manifest as acting out behaviour (Billow 2000).

Our recommendations for practice based on the results yielded in this study include, *firstly*, class discussions of the socio-political and economic realities of high, mid, and low-resource

schools and, *secondly*, role-playing classroom management strategies around emotionally demanding circumstances prior to teaching experience blocks (see Auld 2022b). As debrief groups have been effective in this context because of their ability to provide a critical reflective space for projective identification to be understood as communicative, and, therefore, become contained, a *third* recommendation is to implement teaching experience debrief groups with first year students after their first teaching experience block. The aim here will be to investigate the effectiveness of containment offered by debrief groups over the four years of the degree. To consolidate these findings and more comprehensively investigate the extent to which containment can be tracked, and decolonisation and transformation of higher education fostered, future research could include a qualitative component in the approach to produce a mixed methods design. *Finally*, in terms of our ethical responsibility to contain distressing emotions that we evoke in the design of our curricula, as well as the importance of transforming higher education, debrief groups could, and should, be considered for any teaching and learning activities in other areas of higher education which may provoke anxiety in the face of the complex historical legacy of apartheid and the compound socio-political and economic realities currently faced by South Africans.

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Annexure A

PRE-DEBRIEFING: How Are You Feeling?
We are committed to providing you with useful South African teaching experience, so we welcome your comments. Please fill out this side of the questionnaire prior to engaging with the debriefing. Thank you.

Please rate how ANXIOUS you felt during your teaching experience.

D 1 D 2 D 3 D 4 D 5

Overwhelmed Calm

Please rate how HELPLESS you felt during your teaching experience.

D 1 D 2 D 3 D 4 D 5

Disempowered Empowered

How did you find your teaching experience?

Emotionally traumatic D Yes | D No
Reflective of life's difficulties D Yes | D No
Challenging and problematic D Yes | D

No Please rate the usefulness of your teaching experience to your development as a teacher.

D 1 D 2 D 3 D 4 D 5

Useless Useful

Please rate your ability to cope with negative teaching experiences.

D 1 D 2 D 3 D 4 D 5

Struggle Easy

Do you feel that teaching experiences should be challenging?

D 1 D 2 D 3 D 4 D 5

Never Always

Do you feel that you would benefit from a debriefing session after your teaching experience?

D 1 D 2 D 3 D 4 D 5

Never Always

Thank you for taking the time to complete this part of the questionnaire.

POST-DEBRIEFING: How Are You Feeling Now? After the debriefing please take a moment to fill out this side of the questionnaire before placing it in the box on the table on your way out. Thank you.

Please rate how ANXIOUS you now feel about your future teaching experience.

O 1 O 2 O 3 O 4 O 5

Overwhelmed Calm

Please rate how EMPOWERED you feel about your future teaching experience.

O 1 O 2 O 3 O 4 O 5

Disempowered Empowered

What sort of future experience would you like?

Reflective of a Western context 0 Yes | 0 No
Reflective of life in South Africa 0 Yes | 0 No
Challenging and relevant 0 Yes | 0 No

Do you feel that facing challenges is useful to your development as a teacher?

O 1 O 2 O 3 O 4 O 5

Never Always

Do you need support from others when facing challenges?

O 1 O 2 O 3 O 4 O 5

Never Always

Do you feel that empowering children to better cope with life's difficulties is part of education?

O 1 O 2 O 3 O 4 O 5

Disagree Agree

Do you feel that you benefited from engaging in this debriefing?

O 1 O 2 O 3 O 4 O 5

Disagree Agree

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.