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Therapeutic Factors in a Group Experiential Learning Program in Teacher Education

This qualitative study explored the experiential group learning experiences of student teachers (STs) who participated in a two-day experientially based group learning programme, as part of their curriculum at a teacher training institute in Singapore. Thirteen groups were selected, with 12 members from each group randomly recruited to participate in the focus group interviews. A total of thirteen focus group interviews were conducted, with 109 STs participating in the sessions. The interview data was transcribed, coded and presented in themes using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The main themes were largely compatible with the therapeutic factors identified by psychiatrist Irvin Yalom that were found to improve interaction and facilitated outcome in group processes in his research. The overall results show that the dominant therapeutic factors experienced by the participants included instillation of hope, universality, imitative behaviour and cohesiveness. These findings provide us with valuable information that may help facilitate a positive and beneficial group learning experience in teacher education.

Keywords**:** groups, teacher education, experiential learning, therapeutic factors

Introduction

In experiential learning, learning takes place through 'the integration of concrete emotional experiences with cognitive processes' (Kolb & Fry, 1975, p.34). Types of experiential learning include service learning and volunteering in the community (Gao, 2015), practicum (Behr & Temmen, 2012) and professional development workshops (Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016). This form of learning can occur in the individual or group context. In this paper, we will focus on experiential learning in groups. Such experientially based group learning (herein experiential groups) occurs when experiential learning takes place in groups, and students learn through active participation in the group experience (Swiller, 2011). These experiential groups come by different names and with a myriad of purposes: human relations groups, training groups, T-groups, sensitivity groups, human potential groups, basic encounter groups and personal growth groups (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Benefits of such groups have been well-documented. For instance, at its very least, group members can provide each other with emotional support (Swiller, 2011). Participation in a group setting may also provide an emotional learning experience about acceptance, self-disclosure, feelings of vulnerability and hostility, and insight into one's strengths and weaknesses (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In other words, students are afforded the opportunity for higher levels of emotional participation and engagement, and reflection and self-evaluation. The learning process thus becomes more effective when the individual is immersed in an intersubjective, group setting where such opportunities are available (Di Stefano, Ruvolo, & Lo Mauro, 2019).

The use of experiential groups as a pedagogical tool in teacher education is not new, and usually involved much reflection on the beginning teachers' part (Girvan, Conneely & Tangney, 2016). Indeed, it has been a longstanding tradition in educational settings (Swiller, 2011). Learning from experience has been considered one of the most fundamental and organic means of learning (Beard & Wilson, 2018). There has been evidence that students learn

effectively when they are actively involved in the learning process and that content learned in an experiential context is retained longer and can be transferred readily to practical work (Behr & Temmen, 2012). There is also a strong potential of boosting beginning teachers' capacity to integrate theory and practice and of expanding their general outlook (see Harfitt & Chow, 2018). Such groups also provide beginning teachers with the opportunity to take up an 'active, analytical and reflective role' that can nurture them into 'critically minded reflective professionals' (Gao, 2015, p.435). Furthermore, increased knowledge about group members' experiences may provide educators with valuable information that can help to facilitate a positive, beneficial, and ethically responsible learning experience (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009). In Hong Kong, there has been evidence that beginning teachers found such group programmes useful; it was found that group collaboration, self-reflection and the supportive learning environment were particularly helpful (Lee, 2019). Hence there is value in incorporating experiential groups in teacher education. However, there has been little research exploring the use of such groups in teacher education in Singapore. This paper therefore aims to explore if and how such benefits may manifest in teacher education in Singapore.

Purpose of Study

The main research objective of this paper is to explore the presence of therapeutic factors through participation in an experientially based group learning programme. These therapeutic factors are expected to have a significant and positive effect on group learning outcomes. Yet, although many researchers have demonstrated benefits from participation in such experiential groups (e.g. Corey, 2004; Harfitt & Chow, 2018; Ieva et al., 2009; Swiller, 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young, Reysen, Eskridge & Ohrt, 2013), less research has been conducted to explore how therapeutic factors manifest in such groups. Indeed, a search on the existing literature revealed that this would be one of the first to study therapeutic factors in experiential

groups in the context of teacher education. The search was conducted in databases including ERIC and PsycArticles over a period of the past 15 years, from 2005 to 2020. Keywords used in the search included experiential groups, teacher education and therapeutic factors. As therapeutic factors may help to enhance well-being among the members (McWhirter, Nelson & Waldo, 2014), there is value in understanding how these factors may help facilitate a positive and beneficial group learning experience for teachers in training. For example, increased knowledge about STs' experiences in Meranti Project and the therapeutic factors present will provide valuable information that may help to better facilitate a positive, beneficial, and effective learning experience for them. Furthermore, therapeutic factors can help guide the facilitator's selection of strategies to shape the group experience and to maximize its effectiveness with group members, since specific therapeutic factors are found to be of relative importance in different types of groups (McWhirter, Nelson & Waldo, 2014). Hence it may be useful and worthwhile to explore Yalom's therapeutic factors in this type of experiential group in the context of teacher education.

Background

Teacher Education in Singapore

The educational system in Singapore is run by a central agency, the Ministry of Education (MOE). MOE oversees the management and development of government-funded schools nation-wide. Similarly, teacher training is highly centralized and is run by the [name removed]. [Name removed] provides three main initial teacher preparation programs: The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), the Diploma in Education (Dip Ed) and the Degree in Education (BA/BSc). These programs are catered to applicants with different pre-university qualifications and are designed to specifically prepare beginning teachers for all government schools from primary schools to Junior Colleges. The design of the programmes is based on

the list of desired attributes of beginning teachers as developed by [name removed]. These attributes are anchored on the three key components of knowledge, skills and values (National Institute of Education [NIE], 2009) (see Appendix A). Teachers are not only required to have these literacies themselves; they need to be able to establish learning environments for their students to cultivate them as well (NIE, 2009).

The Meranti Project

[Name removed] aims at a holistic development of beginning teachers, or student teachers (STs) as they are called in [name removed], with an emphasis on value and character development. Named after a tropical tree with extremely hard wood and hence symbolizing resilience, the Meranti Project is an MOE-funded personal development programme specifically tailored for STs with that aim in mind. The programme takes place in the first year of their study, regardless of the course they are enrolled in. Since its inception in 2009, more than 14000 STs have taken part in the 2-day program in groups of 20. For the past two years, each group has been facilitated by two facilitators who have undergone an intensive one-day training session conducted by the Office of Teacher Education in [name removed]. Previously the facilitators were engaged from external educational organizations. The programme is designed as a personal growth group and is experiential in nature (Lee & Low, 2014). With the aid of activities such as informal open sharing sessions that facilitate deeper exploration of self, STs are given the opportunity to share their personal thoughts, beliefs, values and experiences with their peers in a safe environment (NIE, n.d.). At the end of the program, they are expected to have experienced the core social emotional competencies, which will provide them with the knowledge and skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop care and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships and handle challenging situations effectively (MOE, n.d.). In other words, the STs are expected to have enhanced self-awareness,

social awareness, and relationship management skills. Using structured activities, these STs, who share similar characters such as teacher attributes, are given the opportunity to grow psychologically as a person. These activities are carefully designed and executed, with space for deeper exploration. Facilitators use their facilitation skills and group counselling skills to help them gain awareness and insight. Brief descriptions of some of the main activities in the program can be found in Appendix B. In addition, the Meranti Project also has the following features of an experiential group, as listed by Yalom and Leszcz (2005): 1) Consists of eight to twenty group members to enable face-to-face interaction between all members; 2) Is often condensed into hours or days; 3) Focuses on members' own experiences; 4) Promotes candour, candidness, exploration, confrontation, and self-disclosure among members; and 5) Emphasizes personal growth rather than therapy.

Literature Review

In this section, the researchers will describe some of the benefits of incorporating experiential groups into teacher education. An overview of Yalom's therapeutic factors and some of the research conducted on experiential groups and these factors will also be presented.

Incorporating Experiential Groups into Teacher Education

As mentioned earlier, students learn better by actively participating in ~~an educational experience such as in~~ experiential groups. Beginning teachers are no exception; there has been evidence of beginning teachers reaping a myriad of benefits from participating in such groups. Among others, these benefits include an enrichment of beginning teachers' understanding and vision as teachers (Gao, 2015), a bridging of theoretical materials and practical teaching (Behr & Temmen, 2012; Harfitt & Chow, 2018), a deeper understanding of learners' diverse needs in a multicultural context (Tangen et al., 2017), an enhancement of their understanding of real-

world environments (Harfitt & Chow, 2018) and meaningful changes in classroom practice (Girvan, Conneely & Tangney, 2016). Examples of such learning experiences include pre-service Chinese language teachers teaching Chinese to ethnic minority students in the community and then sharing their experiences in Hong Kong (Gao, 2015), participation in short-term mobility exchange programmes by Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers (Tangen et al., 2017), and 'pupil laboratories' in Germany where beginning teachers design hands-on experiments and obtain feedback from their peers (Behr & Tenmen, 2012). All these learning experiences have one thing in common: engaging beginning teachers in the process of learning through experience and peer observation and feedback.

Glazier and Bean (2019) examined the impact of experiential groups on the beliefs and practices of students in a master's degree program for experienced teachers. They found that after participating in a weeklong experiential outdoor residency, there were positive changes in three areas: 1) their beliefs about the role of community development in the classroom; 2) their beliefs about the potential of K-12 students to act as change agents; and 3) their views about a teacher's role and responsibility. These in turn resulted in changes in classroom practice. Specifically, they conclude from the analysis of their participant interviews that their participants were 'beginning to teach differently as a result of their new beliefs established in and through their residency experience' (Glazier & Bean, 2019, p. 268). In another recent study, Hughes and Braun (2019) reported that after going through a 15-hour experiential learning experience as part of a literacy methods course, the preservice educators they interviewed not only grew their instructional knowledge but improved their instructional practices, applying more evidence-based practices and taking up a bigger responsibility for their students' learning. They also showed an increased knowledge in building up student confidence and became more comfortable and confident with their teaching content.

As these examples show, there is increasing recognition and appreciation of experiential groups in teacher education. Indeed, in as early as 1976, Stanton had already predicted the growing importance of experiential groups in teacher education. He explained that the effectiveness of the group is reliant on the behaviour of its members and that through interaction, members understand the 'dynamics of group processes such as decision-making processes, leadership, norms, roles, communication distortions' (Stanton, 1976, p. 92). Therefore, to better understand how experiential groups work, it may be helpful to look at group process; in particular, Yalom's therapeutic factors.

Group Processes: A Theoretical Background

The exploration of the presence of group processes in the students' experiences in the Meranti Project not only enable trainers to focus on more important elements of the learning process, but it also guides the use of strategies and design of programmes to deliver better learning outcomes. Group process is defined as the interactions and relationships among members within the group (Gladding, 2015). Many research-based studies have established that group work is beneficial (see Burlingame & Jensen, 2017, for a summary of major research findings from the past 25 years, and Abrams & Hogg, 2017, for a summary of research into group processes and intergroup relations from the past 20 years). For example, participation in group activities may bring about an increase in technical skills, empathic understanding and insight into group communication and interaction (Swiller, 2011); such participation offers individuals the opportunity to explore and improve interpersonal relationships (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Furthermore, as members express themselves in different ways and interact with others, groups may promote the exploration of one's intrapsychic and interpersonal issues, as well as a feeling of community and connectedness (Gladding, 2015).. Based on clinical experience and research conducted on therapy groups, Yalom (Gladding, 2015; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) identified and

described a list of positive primary group variables that often affect the interactions of members and the group in complex ways. Hence, Yalom's therapeutic factors may be a useful framework to guide the exploration of group process in experiential groups.

Yalom's therapeutic factors

Yalom described 11 therapeutic factors (instillation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socialising techniques, imitative behaviour, interpersonal learning, existential factors, catharsis, and group cohesiveness) that contribute to psychotherapy group outcomes and (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Therapeutic factors are facets of the group process that have the potential to benefit the group members (Brabender, Fallon & Smolar, 2004). A description and some background information about each therapeutic factor are presented in Table 1. The researchers believe that although these were derived from psychotherapeutic research, they may be useful in the management and administration of other types of groups.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The presence of these factors is influenced by the composition of the group, and the type of group conducted. In addition, different factors may be helpful at different stages in the group. Lastly, different combinations of these factors may benefit different individuals even if they were in the same group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Research on therapeutic factors.

There have been numerous studies documenting the presence and workings of the therapeutic factors (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). In one such study, McWhirter, Nelson and Waldo (2014)

examined these therapeutic factors in the context of small quilt-making groups. They reported that the top three predominant therapeutic factors present with the highest scores were 1) group cohesiveness, 2) altruism and 3) development of socializing techniques. The group members they surveyed also reported lower depression scores and higher satisfaction with life scores. Hence it was suggested that there may be significant relationships between specific group therapeutic factors and positive emotion, which consequently may help to enhance long-term psychological well-being among group members (McWhirter, Nelson & Waldo, 2014). It is also interesting to note that in Glazier and Bean's (2019) study, several other benefits arising from this group residency were reminiscent of the therapeutic factors that Yalom discussed. For example, participants spoke of 'camaderie' (p. 268), using 'resources and experiences from the farm to build community among her students' (p.268). These were similar to group cohesiveness and imparting of information respectively.

Many studies on therapeutic factors were conducted with the group as a unit of analysis (Kivlighan, 2011). For a more balanced view, Kivlighan (2011) examined the relationship between individual group member's and group members' perceptions of therapeutic factors and sessions valuations. He also examined the relative variance in therapeutic factors as a function of sessions, group members and groups. As a result, he found that there was little variance in the perception of therapeutic factors at the group level. There were also no relationships between group members' perceptions of these factors and session effectiveness, depth or smoothness. Hence these findings support Yalom and Leszcz's (2005) argument that a therapeutically effective group culture should be the focus of the group leader, rather than individual group member change.

It would also seem that different combinations of therapeutic factors are required for groups with different goals and objectives to be effective. Kivlighan and Holmes (2004)

conducted a cluster analysis of 24 studies that had examined the importance of therapeutic factors as described by Yalom. Based on the ranking of therapeutic factors, they identified four major types of groups: 1) Affective-insight groups ranked acceptance, catharsis, interpersonal learning and self-understanding as the most valued factors and therefore appeared to focus more on active learning to promote insight amongst members; 2) Affective-support groups rated acceptance, installation of hope and universality highly and were more focused on affective support and encouragement; 3) Cognitive-support groups highly valued vicarious learning and guidance and placed more emphasis on obtaining cognitive support, such as advice, from others; and 4) Cognitive-insight groups had high rankings for interpersonal learning, self-understanding and vicarious learning, focusing on actively learning from interpersonal interactions and using group experiences to learn more about themselves. Here, Kivlighan and Holmes are suggesting that the differences in the rankings of therapeutic factors may have arisen from different theoretical orientations and objectives of the group.

Hence the concept of therapeutic factors may offer a framework in which to identify and explore the elements of different groups that are most helpful and significant. This would form the background for the analysis of this research. These therapeutic factors offer a basis for further research on a non-clinical group process, such as that of experiential group learning. Consequently, although the concept was developed from clinical experiences and therapy groups, the emphasis on interpersonal learning, group interaction and mechanisms for change render these therapeutic factors relevant to the Meranti Project.

Research Design

The main purpose of this study is to explore STs' experience in the Meranti Project. Specifically, the two research objectives are to explore: 1) the meanings that STs have made

~~of their Meranti experiences; and 2) the presence of therapeutic factors (if any) through working in a group.~~ In view of this, the researchers chose a qualitative approach for this study. Focus group interview sessions with semi-structured questions were used to generate discussion about the Meranti Project experiences. The semi-structured form of interviewing would enable the researcher to modify initial questions and probe interesting and important areas that may arise (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This would provide the researchers with important data as participants' reports are considered to be a rich source of information about group processes (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In addition, Hennink (2014) mentions several advantages to using focus group interviews in research that resonated with this study's purpose. Firstly, such discussions can generate a relatively larger volume of data and a greater variety of perspectives than individual interviews. Secondly, the group interaction allows participants to discuss experiences and raise unique perspectives with relatively little input from the facilitator. Participants are also able to build on and react to the responses of others. In addition, they can highlight issues that are important to them. Lastly, participants may be more inclined to share their experiences as they hear others sharing theirs.

Focus Group Protocol

The focus group protocol was developed to generate discussion about participants' feelings and experiences with the Meranti Project. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to one hour and were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis. The facilitators utilized a semi structured interview protocol for each interview, where the following main questions were asked: 1) What were some of the experiences that stood out during the two days? 2) How did you feel towards your group members and the group as a whole? and 3) How did your feelings about them change from the first to the second day? When required, follow-up probes were used to clarify some points or for more elaboration. While an interview guide with the questions

and probes to be covered was developed to improve interviewer consistency, the questions were framed broadly and openly to facilitate a more dynamic and detailed exploration of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This allows the participants greater opportunity to share their perceptions and understandings of what they have experienced.

Thirteen Meranti groups were selected from the December 2018 and August 2019 cohort, with 12 members from each group recruited using the random number generator technique to participate in the focus groups. As the composition of each focus group was by their Meranti groups, the participants were in the company of their own group members. This not only increased the depth and potential accuracy of the information shared, but there is also less time needed to build group rapport as the participants are already familiar with one another (Hennink, 2014). A total of 109 STs participated in the focus groups, which translated to a positive response rate of 69.9%. For convenience, the group interviews were held at [name removed], and during term time whenever the STs had a break in their schedule. At the beginning of each session, the participants were asked to read and sign the informed consent form. Confidentiality issues and their rights as a research participant were reiterated to them. Each participant will be assigned a code and no identifying information was to be released in the final report.

Participants

As this study seeks to explore the therapeutic factors that were present in the Meranti Project through participants' own experiences and reflections, the sample of the study consisted of STs from the December 2018 and August 2019 cohort. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the participants were Chinese (76.1%), female (71.6%) and from the PGDE program (45.9%). The combined descriptive data for the 2018 and 2019 cohort can be seen in Table 3. Most of the

demographic characteristics of the participants in the Focus Group Interview (FGI) were observed to be similar to those of the two cohorts.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

[Insert Table 3 here.]

Data processing and analysis

The two main criteria for evaluating quality in qualitative research are credibility and trustworthiness (Cope, 2014). As much as possible during the focus group interview sessions, the facilitator (the second author) would paraphrase the participants' responses to confirm what was being said. At the end of the session, a brief summary of the main points was also presented to the participants. This was meant to enhance the credibility of the data collected. To address issues of trustworthiness, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and each finding was supported by the exact quotes from the participants. This would provide adequate and convincing evidence to back up the findings and interpretation made by the researchers (Merriam, 2002).

IPA is concerned with exploring in detail lived experiences and the meanings participants have ascribed to these experiences. Hence IPA was a suitable approach to analyse the data as it meets the research aims of focusing on participants' Meranti experiences and understanding and analysing the experiences from the participants' point of view "through a process of interpretative activity" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.51). Here, a two-stage interpretation process takes place: the participants attempt to make sense of their world, and the researcher makes sense of the participants' attempt to make sense of their world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The researchers reviewed and adapted the steps outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) into the analysis process. First, the data collected was transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. The researchers then went through the transcripts thoroughly twice to become familiarized with the data. Secondly, the researchers carefully developed a comprehensive and detailed set of notes, making sure to stay faithful to the participants' responses. Thirdly, as focus group discussions produce a large volume of data, data reduction was required. According to Hennink (2014), this can be achieved by identifying core themes, conceptualizing data or developing a framework to structure the results. Consequently, with the aid of the notes made, a set of emergent themes and concepts were identified, labelled and sorted into relevant clusters. These clusters were then categorized and checked against the data. Finally, the researchers familiarized themselves with Yalom's 11 therapeutic factors based on Yalom's 60-item group therapeutic-factor list (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This was done last to ensure that the list would not influence the development of the themes. They then consolidated and discussed the findings. These were done with the main aim of IPA in mind: to understand how participants perceive and make sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As mentioned earlier, the open-endedness and flexibility of semi-structured focus group interviews would have facilitated the generation and subsequent analysis of participant-generated meanings that made meeting this aim possible.

Findings

Out of a total of 11 therapeutic factors identified by Yalom, four factors appeared to be the most dominant for the participants: 1) Instillation of hope, 2) Universality, 3) Imitative behaviour and 4) Cohesiveness. These four factors will be presented here with relevant selected quotes from the participants. It is important to note that these themes were not selected solely

based on their prevalence within the data, but also the complexities and richness of what is being discussed (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Theme 1: Instillation of Hope

Many participants spoke about feeling inspired and encouraged as they heard about how others managed to overcome challenges and problems in their lives. They felt that their own problems could also be overcome in time as well. This feeling was especially strong during the activity 'My Life Journey', where they shared about their life experiences, both the good and the challenging times. By observing the improvement of others, members realize that they were able to rise above their problems and move on with their lives. This in turn provided the participants with a sense of hope that most issues can eventually be resolved.

Participant 1F learned that having a positive attitude can help one overcome difficult times:

> I've been listening to some of our peers' experiences, they didn't have an easy time since young, but they choose to be positive. If you see them now you wouldn't know that they've been through all these... earlier. So, I guess it's like what kind of attitude do you want to have or portray.

Participant 1D felt that his future students will face similar issues that he had faced and overcome, and hence wanted to pass on a message of hope:

> For me I felt that certain negative experiences that I used to have, maybe next time my students will have so it's a kind of reminder to tell myself to tell them that eventually things will get better.

It was comforting for Participant 6A to know that help ~~is~~ would be available in difficult times:

It was to encourage one another, to let everyone know that the journey may have been hard but whatever that comes after this, there are people who will support you… because we may not have a solution for whatever we were sharing but at least we know that there are people around to help.

Theme 2: Universality

Another one of the most commonly cited factors was universality. Many participants mentioned the activity 'My Fears', wherein they were to write a fear that they have on pieces of paper anonymously and drop them into a bag. Facilitators subsequently invited each participant to draw one fear from the bag and discuss about it. It was observed that the phrase 'not alone' was often mentioned when talking about this activity. There were more common views than they expected, and it was a relief to know that others share similar worries and concerns in life.

Participant 4F reported that, "We have people with similar views, like when we say something and everyone's like nodding, then it's like ok, we're not the only one who thought about this." Participant 6G concurred, "I think it also allows us to know on… the teaching track, you are not alone as you have friends there to help out when we are in need.." Participant 8C shared similar sentiments, "I appreciate that maybe someone else shared the same problem like I do so I didn't feel so alone."

Theme 3: Imitative Behaviour

At the onset of the Meranti Project, members in the group had only known each other for less than two months. Many revealed that they did not feel comfortable enough with each other to share intimate details about themselves. However, once someone shared personal information, the rest of the group felt more inclined to divulge personal information as well. They reciprocated with similar behaviour.

For example, Participant 2J said:

I think the first person who shared is the most important. Because if the first person doesn't go very deep into her problems, I guess the rest wouldn't follow or will only tell this much of a story. But the first person… went quite into detail about her problems then I guess that was a platform where everyone… dive deep into it also.

Similarly, Participant 13H said she felt that a safe space has been established:

Once someone shares their experience, it really made other… people open up. So it feels like a very safe environment because you know that everybody's opening up and it's just a very good environment where you can learn from one another.

In addition, the facilitators' attitude and behaviour influenced how the participants responded and reacted in the session. Participant 2E shared that: We can tell [the facilitators] are really passionate about what they are doing with us so we felt the sincerity from them, so we reciprocate and we were very genuine and sincere in sharing our stories.

Theme 4: Group Cohesiveness

Simply defined, cohesion is a sense of belonging to the group. In the Meranti Project, participants felt a connection to one another as they learnt more about each other and realized

that they were more similar than they thought. As a result, they felt a sense of belongingness to their Meranti group.

Participant 2A reported that learning about similarities in what they went through helped build a bond with one another:

> We can tell that after sharing our stories, some of us went up to them and said… we went through the same thing. So from the program, we can find some form of connection with one another. We felt like there were similarities and we started sharing things about family and stuff so we're quite alike in a way, so from there we can see things from each other's perspectives and we kind of like grow together as a team.

Participant 8G felt that having similar experiences helped in forging a group identity:

> It also helped to reinforce like a connective identity, like we're all in this together… I felt that the ultimate outcome was that it helped to reinforce a group identity, because like now you know he shares my problems, she shares my concerns, so we are all more alike than different in some ways.

Participant 12D felt a sense of belonging as members shared their thoughts about becoming a teacher: [The Meranti Project] sort of like brings us together because we have different motivations to be a teacher so after hearing each and everyone's motivations and feelings, you belong to that group.

Discussion

This paper explored the therapeutic factors that were present in the Meranti Project, an experientially based group learning programme that all STs in [name removed] are required to

attend. There was evidence to show that therapeutic factors were indeed present in the program; the more dominant factors being instillation of hope, universality, imitative behaviour and cohesiveness. The researchers will discuss how these factors, both singly and together, can boost the effectiveness of this experiential group learning.

The instillation of hope is extremely important in psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Indeed, evidence has shown that it was ranked as the most important therapeutic factor by members in psychodynamic groups (for example see Restek-Petrovic et al., 2014). At the beginning of the group session, hope encourages members to be more involved with other members as they expect that the interaction may help them with their problems in some way (Brabender, Fallon & Smolar, 2004). In other words, by encountering people who have struggled and overcome their problems, participants may believe that they can do the same. Indeed, in the Meranti Project, participants can envision overcoming their problems as others have overcome theirs. As future teachers, they will need to be able to instil a sense of hope and optimism in their students should the students go through a difficult time at home or school. Hope is one of the important virtues to teach students (Kirk, 1982), and it may help build resilience. Hence it is important to promote hope as a therapeutic factor in the session for the STs.

Participants may have come from different walks of life with varying social, cultural and economic backgrounds, but as they share their experiences, they realize there were many commonalities among them and become struck by the universality of their life issues (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2014). As others share their experiences, their feelings of aloneness and alienation may be alleviated and they may also view their own problems in a new perspective (Posthuma, 2002). Indeed, the phrase 'not alone' came up many times in the focus group

sessions. In addition, the sense of similarity with others may boost their sense of hope since others seemed to have been able to overcome problems not unlike their own. This may also provide valuable experience on an affective level, as these STs have increased self-confidence in their own abilities (Behr & Temmen, 2012). As they proceed to teach in schools in the future, STs may also need to reassure their students that they are not alone in their problems.

There is a substantial level of interaction in a group, as members participate in group activities for two days. Each member has the opportunity to observe the behaviours of the other members, and to respond accordingly. When behaviour is seen to evoke a positive reaction, members are likely to model that behaviour (Posthuma, 2002). In the context of the Meranti Project, the group responded positively in a warm accepting manner when someone in the group started sharing more personal, and occasionally painful, details about themselves. Subsequently the level of self-disclosure also increased. They realized that sharing things about themselves could lead to a safe environment where they could obtain constructive feedback from others. Similarly, group members are as likely to model their behaviour after the facilitators'. What the facilitators demonstrated through their behaviour in the group may be a powerful way to teach members how to relate to one another meaningfully (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2014). For example, when the participants sensed the genuineness and sincerity of the Meranti facilitators, they reciprocated in kind. There has also been evidence that students model their teacher's behaviours in class (e.g. Gillies, 2006). Students are more likely to learn moral and values from their experiences, especially in their interactions with others (Kirk, 1982). Hence in this program STs are made aware that their future students may model their attitudes and behaviours. In other words, their own beliefs and actions may be scrutinised and replicated by their students.

In a cohesive group, members feel a sense of belongingness and unity with one another (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2014). This cohesiveness is developed as members become more

actively involved in the group: sharing about themselves, trying to understand and accept others, and cultivating an interest in others (Posthuma, 2002). According to Yalom, group cohesiveness is required for other therapeutic factors to work optimally (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This could be due to members feeling safer and more comfortable in a cohesive group and as a result, becoming more open to sharing thoughts, feelings and feedback on one another in the group session (Posthuma, 2002). Consequently, as self-exploration and self-disclosure increases, the group experience becomes more helpful (Swiller, 2011). As participant reflection suggests, the combination of these factors may help to create a safe and conducive environment for deep sharing. Although the Meranti sessions take place over only two days, participants reported feeling a connection to one another and a sense of belonging to their group. It was observed that this revelation emerged after they discussed about sharing more personal information about themselves and feeling that they were not alone in their problems. In short, cohesion seemed to have been developed through personal sharing and feelings of universality. Similarly in the school context, cohesiveness is crucial as a cohesive classroom will lead to a more positive learning environment for the students (Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001). Therefore, as STs experience first-hand how cohesiveness can create a safe learning environment, they may be more inclined to replicate this in their classrooms.

According to Kivlighan and Holmes (2004), while the characteristics of a group may influence the ranking of importance of the therapeutic factors, it is not beneficial to 'identify specific client populations … and creating yet another ranking of therapeutic factors' (p.32). Groups vary in their relative emphasis on affective and cognitive learning and on insight versus support in terms of outcomes (Kivlighan & Holmes, 2004). However, in the context of this paper, it is less clear-cut to categorise the Meranti Project in terms of affective-versus-cognitive learning and insight-versus-support. Hence there may still be value in exploring which

therapeutic factors are dominant in the group process to improve the outcomes of the programme.

Limitations of research

There are three main limitations that warrant discussion. Firstly, there are no known quantitative measures to assess the breadth and depth of therapeutic group factors (McWhirter, Nelson & Waldo, 2014). Therefore, although certain therapeutic factors were observed to be more salient than the others, it may not necessarily mean that the other factors were not important. Secondly, there was also no evidence to provide a rank order of the predominant factors. For example, the participant may discuss at large about one factor, but also briefly mention a few others. Next, as with any qualitative investigation, the study relies heavily on the responses provided by the participants. Other factors could have affected participants' experiences and recollections of the experiences, such as previous group experience with experiential learning and individual interpretations of reality (Merriam, 2002). In addition, some information may have been withheld due to sensitive and confidential issues and the fact that the principal investigator was from the Office of Teacher Education overseeing the Meranti Project. In response, four ameliorative measures were undertaken: 1) Ensured technical accuracy of the transcribed data, 2) Assured participants of the confidentiality of their responses, 3) Reiterated to participants that the study was neither a program evaluation nor a student evaluation, and 4) Had the second author, who was not involved in any aspect of the Meranti Project, facilitate the interview sessions.

There is also a potential ethical limitation that needs to be addressed. Participants were grouped according to their Meranti groups, and hence their responses may be potentially affected by social desirability. For example, responses pertaining to their feelings about their group

members or the group as a whole may not be forthcoming. However, the authors believe that in a focus group interview, participants are given the chance to respond and react to what is being shared in the group. Interaction among participants also becomes a source of data. There is also higher ecological validity as group members challenge or respond to contributions from others. While open disclosure may be hampered by the presence of others in the group, there is also a high possibility that they may speak more openly as they were already acquainted with each other.

Implications

It may not have been the purpose of the Meranti Project to be a source of therapy for the STs, however many have found the experience therapeutic. For example, after hearing others share about their experiences, they may feel more optimistic and confident that they can overcome the challenges they face in their personal lives or in the course they are in. Other therapeutic benefits include receiving collegial support and feedback and having a deeper understanding of individual and group dynamics (Swiller, 2011). In addition, there is also potential to enhance social emotional competencies through self-reflection in the group sessions. Participants reported having a higher level of self and social awareness when they share their experiences with the rest of the group. Hence identification and analysis of the therapeutic factors present in the Meranti Project can help [name removed] better manage the program to meet specific goals and improve outcomes (McWhirter, Nelson & Waldo, 2014). Finally, as group learning is prevalent in both teacher education and schools, it may be worthwhile to explore the value and impact of therapeutic factors, a concept that has been proven to be fundamental to group dynamics (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; see also Gonzales de Chavez, Gutierrez, Ducaju & Fraile, 2000; Young et al., 2013; Webster & Spellings, 2016), in learning institutions. Indeed, this may further understanding and research in the area of experiential learning groups in education in the context of Singapore.

Based on these preliminary findings, future research might focus on the presence of positive emotion that may result from participant experiences of Yalom's factors and how these may translate into their future teaching roles. In addition, as research has shown that therapeutic factors deemed helpful by participants may be different from those of the facilitators (Kivlighan, 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), there may be value in interviewing the facilitators of the Meranti Project to explore their experiences.

Finally, therapeutic factors may also help facilitate a positive and beneficial group learning experience in other educational settings. Hence it may be worthwhile to extend this research in group learning in other educational settings in Singapore as well. A good example would be counsellor training groups (see Gold, Kivlighan & Patton, 2013).

The findings suggest that implementing an experientially based group learning programme may be useful and effective in the local teacher education context. This paper also situates Yalom's therapeutic factors in the Singapore teacher education context, and exploration of therapeutic factors present in other settings and cultures might be compared and contrasted.

Conclusion

There is evidence that experiential groups may be an effective pedagogical strategy to promote personal growth in beginning teachers (see Lee & Low, 2014; Behr & Temmen, 2012; Girvan, Conneely & Tangney, 2016). Hence the aim of this study was to explore if and which therapeutic factors were present in an experiential program for STs so as to improve the delivery and effectiveness of the program. It was found that the factors of instillation of hope,

universality, imitative behaviour and cohesiveness came up most often in the interviews. There is therefore evidence that these four factors may be the most salient in the program. As Yalom and Leszcz (2005) had hoped that the delineation of therapeutic factors would help formulate a set of effective tactics and strategies for the therapist, the researchers hold similar hope that this study will contribute to the same for experiential groups. As important as it is for teachers to acquire the right values, skills and knowledge to be effective practitioners to bring about the desired outcomes in education (NIE, 2009), they also need a safe space for self-reflection and a source of support from their peers. Indeed, this may be a critical first step to operationalise these concepts to improve teacher education programmes.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Desired Attributes of Beginning Teachers

Values	Knowledge	Skills
• Beliefs that all pupils can learn • Care and concern for all pupils • Respect for diversity • Commitment and dedication to the profession • Collaboration, sharing and team spirit • Desire for continuous learning, excellence and innovation	• Education contexts • Content • Curriculum • Pupils • Pedagogy • Self	• Pedagogical skills • Interpersonal skills • Reflective skills • Personal skills • Administrative and management skills

Appendix B

Table B1. Main Activities in the Meranti Project

Activity	Actions/Procedures	Objectives/Outcomes
Photo in Phone	Participants choose a photograph from their phone (either online or in their album) and use it to talk about themselves.	To recognize how similar or different participants are and how these can draw them closer together.
My Fears	Participants are to write a fear that they have on pieces of paper without identifying themselves and drop them into a bag. Facilitators invite each participant to draw one fear from the bag and share his or her interpretation of the fear. Discuss and share some of the common fears and how it affects all of them.	To recognize that participants may not be alone in their worries and fears and that others may be facing similar problems or challenges.
My Life Journey	Participants use pictures, words or symbols to tell their 'life journey' on a piece of drawing paper. They are encouraged to think about their experiences of being motivated or inspired to become a teacher. They will then take turns to share their stories with the group.	To increase self-awareness and trust in the group through appropriate disclosure in a safe environment.
Privilege Walk	The Privilege Walk is a social experiment designed to visually represent privilege and create awareness and understanding among participants. Statements relating to race, gender, disability, financial status and sexual orientation are read out and participants are asked to take a step forward or backward based on their responses.	To reflect on the different areas in participants' lives where they have privilege as well as the areas where they don't.
Me in the Mirror	Participants divide themselves into two equal groups to form two circles, where each participant in one circle will face another in the second circle. The participants in the inner circle will think about the positive behavior/attitude of their partners over the duration of the program. They will then share that positive feedback with them. The circle will then be rotated in such a way that everyone will have a chance to give and receive feedback.	To enhance participants' ability and courage to give and receive constructive feedback, and to share what they have observed in the program.

Table 1. Therapeutic Factors of Group Therapy

Factor	Description
Instillation of hope	Members feel a sense of inspiration and hope for themselves as they observe others overcome their problems. They are encouraged by other members who are now more successfully managing their lives.
Universality	Members realize that other members may share similar feelings, thoughts and problems. They may feel less alone in their situations.
Imparting of information	Advice, suggestions and information are generated in the group and shared among the members.
Altruism	Members recognize they have something useful to offer to the others. They help and support each other without the expectation of getting anything in return.
Corrective recapitulation of the primary family group	Members have the opportunity to learn more functional patterns of communication and behaviour with others by re-enacting family dynamics. They learn to avoid repeating unhelpful and dysfunctional past interactive patterns.
Development of socializing techniques	Members learn more appropriate ways of socialization through feedback about their behaviour. This may help improve their social skills.
Imitative behavior	Members model their behavior after that of the leader's or others'.
Interpersonal learning	Emotional healing takes place as members learn the positive benefits of good interpersonal relationships, through communicating and relating to others.
Existential factors	Members are given the opportunity to explore the meaning of life and of their role in the world. They also learn to take responsibility for their actions.
Catharsis	Members learn to express their own feelings, both positive and negative, in a healthy way. This may help release emotional tension.
Group cohesiveness	Members experience a sense of trust in and belonging to the group. They feel understood and accepted by others in the group. One of the most important factors required for personal development to occur.

(Adapted from Yalom & Leszcz, 2005)

Table 2: Descriptive Data for FGI Participants

Program	Number of participants	% of total	Gender		Ethnicity			
			Male	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others
PGDE	50	45.9	15	35	43	3	4	0
BA/BSc	32	29.4	10	22	28	3	1	0
DipEd	27	24.8	6	21	12	8	5	2
Total	109	100	31	78	83	14	10	2
%	100	-	28.4	71.6	76.1	12.8	9.2	1.8

Table 3: Combined Descriptive Data for 2018 and 2019 Cohorts

Program	Number of students	% of total	Gender		Ethnicity			
			Male	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Others
PGDE	1106	82.0	346	760	852	86	103	65
BA/BSc	127	9.4	47	80	108	5	10	4
DipEd	115	8.5	19	96	59	27	17	12
Total	1348	100	412	936	1019	118	130	81
%	100	-	30.6	69.4	75.6	8.8	9.6	6.0