The Impact of Balint Group Participation on the Leadership Development of School Principals:

An Evaluation Report

Dempsey, M., King, P., O'Gorman, M.T., Lynch, J., Moller, B., Redmond, M. (2026).
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Secretariat of Secondary Schools
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List of Abbreviations used in the Report

Abbreviation	Definition
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools
DEY	Department of Education and Youth
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
IBF	International Balint Federation
JMB	Joint Managerial Body
NHS	National Health Service
RTA	Reflective Thematic Analysis
VUCA	Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous

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Executive Summary

This evaluation report examines the impact of participation in Balint Groups on the leadership development and wellbeing of Irish second-level school principals. The study is situated in a context of increasing workload and 'worry-load' for principals, intensified policy demands, and well-documented risks of stress, burnout, and isolation in school leadership. In response to these conditions, the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) introduced a pilot Balint Group for principals in 2015 using a co-leadership model (a principal co-leader and a group analytic psychotherapist). The initiative has since expanded to thirteen JMB-associated groups nationally, with almost 30% of voluntary secondary school principals having participated. While Balint Groups have a long history in medicine and other helping professions, their use as a leadership development intervention for school principals in Ireland is new; accordingly, the evidence base on impact in this educational context has been limited.

Balint Groups provide a structured, confidential, peer-based setting in which principals reflect on 'cases' drawn from their professional relationships with staff, students, parents, and the wider system. The method prioritises feelings and meaning-making over advice-giving or problem-solving: following brief clarifying questions, the presenter symbolically steps back while the group explores the relational and emotional dynamics at play. The process is designed to support perspective-taking, tolerance of uncertainty, and deeper awareness of the unconscious communications that can shape professional encounters. This evaluation set out to:

(1) explore how participation influences principals' reflective capacity, leadership practice, and wellbeing within their schools, and,

(2) examine the dynamics and impacts of the principal–psychotherapist co-leadership model that convenes and contains the group process.

Methodology. The research adopted a qualitative exploratory design informed by case study principles. It was interpretivist in orientation and drew on psychoanalytic and leadership-development theory to frame enquiry. Data were generated through semi-structured focus groups designed to mirror the Balint co-led experience. Purposeful sampling was used (with JMB as gatekeeper) to include variation in principal experience and school context. Three phases of data collection were conducted:

(a) two 90-minute focus groups with principals who currently participate (PG1 in-person; PG2 online)

(b) a 90-minute online focus group with Balint co-leaders (including principal and psychotherapist co-leaders), and,

(c) a focus group and an interview with principals who did not participate or who left early ('early leavers').

Data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis, combining deductive a priori themes from the literature (e.g., tolerating not-knowing, empathy, the role of silence) with inductive development of themes from participants' accounts. Ethical approval was granted by Maynooth University's Faculty of Social Science Ethics Committee (Ethics Review ID: 40278), and the study employed safeguards including informed consent, pseudonyms, independent facilitation, and secure data handling.

Headline findings: impact for participating principals. Across the participating principals' focus groups, four interconnected themes describe the reported impact of Balint participation:

(1) the Balint group process as a means of building cohesion

(2) Balint as a distinctive reflective space

(3) leadership development, practice, and growth, and,

(4) school leadership as an emotional practice.

Participants consistently portrayed Balint as a rare form of professional learning that attends to the emotional and relational dimensions of leadership - dimensions they perceived as largely absent from conventional training and policy frameworks.

1) **Building cohesion: confidentiality, trust, and the 'container'.** Confidentiality emerged as foundational - described as the enabling condition for honest disclosure, vulnerability, and meaningful reflection. Over time, participants reported a progression from initial discomfort and silence to trust, laughter, and a sense of 'safe ears'. When cohesion was present, principals experienced the group as an empathic community where they could be human, admit uncertainty, and speak about the realities of the role without fear of judgement. Co-leadership was repeatedly identified as central to creating and maintaining this safety: the combination of a peer principal and a psychotherapist was seen as providing both contextual legitimacy and skilled containment of anxiety and group dynamics. The 'early leavers' accounts underline the importance of careful group composition, explicit contracting around boundaries, and ongoing reinforcement of the Balint task and norms.

2) **Balint as a reflective space: slowing down, deep listening, and learning from silence.** Participants described Balint as a structured pause from the acceleration of school life—'somewhere to stop and think'—where reflection could occur both 'in' and 'on' action. A distinctive learning mechanism was a new appreciation of silence and the refusal to rush into fixing. Initially experienced by some as 'excruciating', silence became understood as productive: it allowed feelings to surface, encouraged patience, and supported principals to hear what was unspoken in themselves and others. The symbolic separation of the presenter from the group during discussion was described by many as helpful in enabling more tolerable processing and perspective-shifting. Participants reported carrying this learning back into their schools by creating more space in difficult conversations, resisting immediate reactions, and listening long enough for underlying issues to emerge. In practical terms, principals described becoming more comfortable with pauses, more attuned to emotional cues, and better able to hold complex interactions without prematurely closing them down through solutions.

3) **Leadership development, practice, and growth: from 'fixing' to perspective-taking.** A consistent thread was the challenge principals face - internally and towards others' expectations - to provide immediate answers. Balint participation supported a shift from habitual solution-seeking towards multi-perspectival thinking and emotionally informed judgement. Principals described learning to 'step back', consider what a situation might feel like for different parties, and reframe conflict through alternative lenses. Participants portrayed this as building a practical 'toolkit' accumulated over time: learning from others' cases became a form of vicarious experience that could be recalled in future dilemmas. Several principals described an internalised 'mini-Balint' process - pausing, reflecting, considering projections or preconceptions, and returning to interactions with a calmer tone. While participants did not always name 'emotional intelligence' explicitly, their accounts indicate growth in attunement skills, empathy, and capacity to tolerate ambiguity - capabilities closely linked in the literature to effective leadership in complex environments.

4) **School leadership as emotional practice: isolation, wellbeing, and resilience.** Participants' accounts strongly affirm the emotional labour of principalship - apex-role isolation, the experience of others 'dumping' problems, and a constant sense of responsibility. Balint was repeatedly framed as an 'antidote' to loneliness: discovering both shared and differing experiences normalised challenges and reduced self-blame. Humour - including dark humour - emerged as cathartic, but only where safety and trust were established. Participants also described practical wellbeing effects that appeared cumulative rather than episodic: leaving meetings 'lighter', carrying less emotional residue, and drawing on relationships with group members between meetings when overwhelmed. Importantly, Balint does not reduce workload; in fact, 'extraction from school' to attend meetings was itself identified as a barrier, alongside cost sensitivities in some school contexts and the added limitations of online participation (privacy, interruption, reduced connection). These constraints suggest that, for the intervention to achieve its potential, system-level enabling conditions (time, access, and legitimacy) matter as much as individual motivation.

Findings on co-leadership: strengths and developmental needs. The co-leadership model is a defining feature of the JMB initiative and is perceived as essential to group functioning. Participants valued the 'richness' of two perspectives and the confidence that group processes are noticed and managed. Co-leaders described the central facilitation challenge as continually steering discussion away from advice and 'fixing' and towards feelings, imagination, and relational meaning - without becoming overly instructional or stifling group spontaneity. At the same time, the evaluation surfaced ambiguity and unevenness in how co-leaders understand and enact 'dynamic administration'. Some principal co-leaders framed their contribution primarily as logistical organisation (venue, dates, reminders), while the report argues that administration in Balint is inherently emotional and relational (e.g., contracting boundaries, monitoring safety, attending to absences, and shaping group norms). The data also indicate potential role blurring and a tendency to rely heavily on the psychotherapist co-leader as 'expert'. Supervision was referenced as supportive, but the findings point to a need for more explicit Balint-specific training, shared language, and structured professional learning for co-leader pairs, particularly as Balint Ireland develops as a national capacity-building resource.

Implications and recommendations

Overall, the findings indicate that Balint Groups function as a high-value leadership development intervention that strengthens reflective capacity, emotional tolerance, deep listening, and perspective-taking, while also offering community-based containment of isolation and stress.

Three policy-level recommendations emerged from this study:

1. **Formally recognise 'relational' leadership skills -** emotional intelligence, conflict management, and relationship-building - as central to effective school leadership and policy delivery. This recognition should be reflected in policy levers (inspection, guidance, professional codes of conduct, self-evaluation templates) and expanded within Looking at Our School to include emotional-intelligence domains.
2. **Scale the Balint approach** as a proven professional learning and sustainability intervention with strong fit for school leadership. The document recommends developing a Department of Education and Youth framework to expand the JMB project.
3. As Ireland undertakes the **Convention on Education and National Conversation**, the document argues that successful implementation will depend on principals, so the emotionally engaged 'leaderliness' required over the coming decades must be explicitly addressed. It recommends a parallel or follow-on forum focused specifically on interrogating principalship, informed by research such as this study.

Ten implications for the JMB Balint Initiative also emerged:

1. **Co-leadership capability and development:** Clarify how aware co-leaders are of the group-development dynamics (e.g., trust-building, use of silence, cohesion) and whether these should be made explicit through structured professional learning rather than left to tacit discovery.
2. **Participant readiness and learning trajectory:** Consider whether members need to understand the developmental 'milestones' of the Balint process, and how articulating otherwise implicit psychodynamic processes might shape expectations and outcomes.
3. **Access, workload, and the case for participation:** With principals' reflective capacity squeezed by administrative and leadership demands, strengthen the rationale for Balint as a high-value reflective safe space, even in the absence of policy-level workload alleviation.
4. **Ethos, self-sacrifice, and sustainability:** Examine whether a servant-leader disposition (within an explicit Christian ethos in many schools) is associated with self-sacrifice or martyrdom, and whether Balint participation helps surface and challenge these patterns.
5. **Practice transfer ('Balint heuristic'):** Test the extent to which principals develop a repeatable on-the-job approach - creating space, allowing silence, noticing projection, reflecting-on-action, and sequencing these moves to enhance professional judgment.
6. **Leadership paradigms and emotional realism:** Interrogate the dominance of cognitive-rational leadership expectations and the need for parity of esteem for emotional/relational forces in school leadership; position this work as making the 'black box' of Balint more visible and therefore more adoptable.
7. **Attendance, critical mass, and tone-setting:** Given that regular participation underpins developmental benefit, explore whether co-leaders can shift from an 'invitation' model to an 'expectation' model to support sustainability and group maturation.
8. **Dynamic administration and role clarity:** Build a shared understanding of 'dynamic administration' (from transactional logistics to psychodynamic stewardship), investigate its impacts, and develop practice-sharing guidance for co-leaders.
9. **Co-leader roles, mutual learning, and 'best practice' stance:** Address insider–outsider tensions between principal and psychotherapist co-leaders, consider light-touch induction into each other's professional 'geographies,' and explore a spectrum of intervention styles (including the risk of over-intervention) to define best-practice facilitation.
10. **Training, resources, and recognition:** Respond to the evident need for structured leadership development (including emerging Irish Balint Society opportunities), provide access to Balint literature and existing project resources, and review the project's reliance on voluntary/pro-bono principal co-leadership for sustainability and acknowledgement.

1 Introduction

The context for this research is the application of the Balint group method with secondary school principals. The psychodynamic basis for the Balint model emphasises the importance of understanding the emotional aspect of relationships in the role of principal. The workload and worry-load of secondary principals have increased significantly in the past decade (JMB 2025, pp 13-14) and, while principals are duty bound to create an environment of emotional support for staff, this dimension is often missing for themselves. In 2015, the JMB established a pilot Balint group for Dublin secondary school principals using the co-leadership model of a principal and a group analytical psychotherapist. Today, there are thirteen JMB-associated Balint groups around Ireland and almost thirty percent of voluntary secondary school principals have been, or are currently, in principal Balint groups.

1.1 How does the Balint Group for Principals work?

The Balint group was initially conceptualised by Michael and Enid Balint as a method to train NHS general practitioners in the 1950s. The Balint group is generally made up of eight to twelve principals meeting approximately every six weeks (and preferably during school hours). Generally, meetings are in person although the advent of Covid 19 changed the context to online meetings and while almost all of the Balint Group for principals have returned to meeting in person, one group continues to meet online. The task of the group is to provide a confidential, peer-based setting to reflect on the emotional experience of the principal role. A member of the group offers a 'case' which may be current or past. After some, but limited, clarifying questions on the details of the case, the presenter moves their chair slightly outside the group, the push-back method, and the remaining members consider what might be happening in the relationships they have heard about in the case. The focus is on feelings rather than giving advice, answering questions, identifying similar experiences or offering solutions. The group does not try to solve the case, nor does it interrogate the presenter. The emphasis is on tolerating and 'sitting with' the uncertainty, the tensions, and the challenges whilst reflecting on the emotions of the presenter, and others involved in the case. A quality group discussion produces different ideas about the case, alternative ways of thinking about the emotional content of the relationships, and a range of perspectives that the presenter might not have thought of on their own.

Balint groups usually have two leaders. Their role is to convene and facilitate the group, to manage the task and provide psycho-educational support around individual, group and organisation psychodynamics that are particular to educational settings. Balint groups have at least four operating factors.

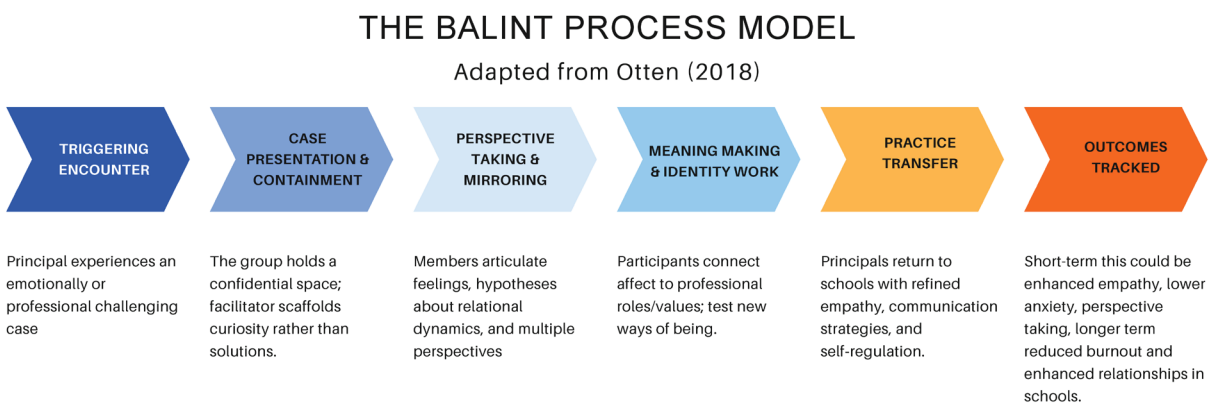
Relief from work-related isolation; feeling a sense of belonging with one's peers is possible when we realise that our peers also have morbid ideas, anxieties, fears, fantasies and impulses, doubts, worries and insecurities.

Being able to think one's own thoughts: the structure of a Balint group offers a unique form of companionship which is of benefit to those presenting a case. Participants can listen to their own thoughts, and to the responses of the group, without having to be concerned with projections or interpersonal dynamics.

Emotional mirroring; it is always easier to see the other person's problem than our own.

Exchanging information and explanations that would not necessarily be accepted or heard in other situations are far more likely to be heard, 'felt', considered and worked-through in the special circumstances of a peer-based Balint group. The Balint process is summarised below in figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 The Balint Process Model



The Balint group process is a structured and carefully facilitated reflective process that supports members in identifying, exploring, and working with their feelings over time. Through collaborative discussion, the group creates conditions in which multiple perspectives and dimensions of a situation can surface. This shared inquiry often brings new light, new emotions, and new interpretations to professional encounters that might otherwise provoke habitual or patterned responses. In this way, the Balint process nurtures a shift from reactive practice toward a more reflective, emotionally attuned, and thoughtfully considered engagement with complex situations.

1.2 Outline of the report

This report is presented in five chapters. Chapter One outlines the context for the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature on Balint groups and examines the use of this process in educational settings, highlighting a gap in research regarding its application with educational leaders. Chapter Three details the methodological and ethical decisions that informed the conduct of the research. Chapter Four presents the findings arising from our data analysis. Finally, Chapter Five discusses these findings, raises key questions for consideration, and offers recommendations for policy and future research.

2 Literature Review

Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life!

George Meredith, 1862.

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of a Balint group is to subvert the usual tendencies away from 'groupthink' (Whyte, 1952; Janis, 1971) and towards an energetic mood that gives the members large scope to explore different interpretations of what is being communicated in professional relationships. Redmond's (2016) study with Ireland's voluntary school principals found that the ability to develop 'connection', and to energise and empower others in respectful and empathic terms, is rooted in a capacity for relationship building, communicating effectively, and for managing conflict.

This literature review looks at the conceptual and historical roots of the Balint process. It then explores how Balint can be applied to education.

2.2 The conceptual and historical roots of the Balint process

2.2.1 The history of The Balint Group.

In the 1950s the Tavistock Clinic held seminars to study the psychological implications in general practice medicine. Quickly, it was realised that the most frequently used pharmacology was the psychological impact of the Doctor. This realisation raised many problems - what dosage? what frequency? what are the side effects, the allergic reactions etc.? Balint and his colleagues realised that there was absolutely no information or training on the use and role of the Doctor other than common sense and that somehow, the Doctor will know what to do and how to be. Michael Balint put in place a number of discussion groups, made up of GPs and Psychiatrists. The groups met once a week for three years, and longer in some cases. Most met in the early afternoon on their free half-day. Attendance was generally ninety-five per cent. The groups, later referred to as research-cum-learning groups, had three tasks; to study the psychological implications in general practice; the second to train general practitioners for the job; and the third to devise a method for such training.

Balint captures the core problem:

> *'...why does it happen so often that, in spite of earnest efforts on both sides, the relationship between patient and doctor is unsatisfactory and even unhappy? Why does it happen that the drug 'Doctor' despite apparently conscientious prescription, does not work as intended?'* (Balint, 1963).

It is interesting, given current mental health concerns, that at the time of writing (1950s), a time of democratic optimism and growth, Balint refers repeatedly to the increased isolation and loneliness of people in society and how often, the NHS Doctor was the only person who was always available (1963, p225).

In applying these questions, and the core problem, to the analogous setting of a secondary school it assumes that the most important and most frequently used 'drug' in a school setting is the psychological function and role of the principal. The Balint Society UK was established in 1969, and The International Balint Federation was established in 1974. Increasingly, the Balint model is being used (Otten, 2017) by professionals from multiple disciplines, by psychotherapists, and allied health professionals like social workers and physiotherapists. In Ireland, Balint group attendance is mandatory in psychiatric training. Psychiatry in Ireland is a leading proponent of Balint group work as an essential form of supervision for clinicians.

2.2.2 Conceptual roots of The Balint Group

The origins of the Balint group are rooted in Michael and Enid Balint's radical application of understanding regression in ordinary general practice. The Balints' important work extended over a period of 40 years and, together with several authors, they developed theories of object relations. Object relations focus on how early relationships with significant others, particularly primary caregivers, form lasting mental representations ('internal objects') that shape an individual's sense of self and patterns of relating to others throughout life. 'Objects' are not inanimate things, they are significant carers and parents, or their mental representations that we internalise. Over time, internalised representations of early caregivers, parents, and authority figures come to influence how we perceive ourselves and others. These internal objects are complex and can include both positive ('good') and negative ('bad') aspects of the parents and significant others as well as the self, often experienced and managed through mechanisms like splitting and projection (Balint, 1957). Splitting is a defensive way of managing anxiety and conflicting feelings by splitting others and ourselves into 'all good' or 'all bad'. Projection and projective identification involve attributing one's own unacceptable feelings onto others, and in projective identification, influencing or controlling the other person unconsciously through these projections. Object relations' theorists argue that from the very beginning, introjection (taking in aspects of others) and projection (projecting out aspects of ourselves) are the basis for internalising objects and splitting them into good and bad (Klein 1997 [1963], 278).

These concepts are visible in the everyday workplace. The most common occurrence of projective identification and 'splitting' is scapegoating. Scapegoating is the anxiety that results from the emotional processes around an individual perceived as the troublemaker, as difficult, as not fitting in etc. This person has become the object for everyone's frustration and anger. In this process, there is a strong desire by groups and individuals to view the 'other' as the problem, exhibiting, as they always do, the exact behaviours we loathe or find most repulsive in ourselves. Whilst scapegoating is a common, though not ubiquitous, feature of school life (Leaman & Watling, 2007) leaders like school principals, can and do become the focus of projections - idealised as saviours or scapegoats, particularly in times of uncertainty. These types of communications, referred to as transferences in the psychoanalytic literature, are unconscious processes where past emotional experiences and relationships influence current interactions. These can be positive, but they can also be negative where feelings from past relationships are unconsciously projected onto an authority figure, just like a principal or a teacher (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1999).

These theories sit comfortably alongside Wilfred Bion's application of psychoanalysis to work groups, organisations and leadership (Bion, 1961, Ruth, 2009). Bion was one of several authors studying the dynamics and consequences of human relationships during and after WWII. Bion links the development of thought to an individual's ability to endure frustration and ambiguity rather than escape into certainty or fantasy. Bion argued that the process of coming to know depends on the development of the ability to tolerate the frustration of uncertainty and 'not knowing'. Bion underscored the importance of holding these projections without acting on them impulsively, allowing the group to work through anxieties together.

This demands emotional intelligence (Gerhardt et al., 2025) and a readiness to 'contain' anxiety without necessarily resolving it immediately.

Early in the research-cum-learning groups, Balint and his colleagues observed that the most important aspect of the drug, 'doctor', was their individual way of responding to patients, i.e. their personality. However, the doctor was the last person to become aware of their own peculiarities even when illustrated in black and white.

Balint observed that,

> *'...every doctor has a vague but almost unshakably firm idea of how a patient ought to behave when ill. Although this idea is anything but explicit and concrete, it is immensely powerful, and influences, as we have found, practically every detail of the doctor's work with his patient. It was almost as if every doctor had revealed knowledge of what was right and what was wrong for patients to expect and to endure, and further, as if he had a sacred duty to convert to his faith all the ignorant and unbelieving among his patients'* (Balint, 1963).

Balint called this 'apostolic zeal', and he argued that,

> *'Avoidance of self-examination and apostolic fervour are, as a rule, interlinked and reinforce each other. I wish to stress that apostolic zeal - like reassurance - is not in itself wrong; on the contrary, it is a highly powerful drug, with great potentialities. As with reassurance, the trouble with apostolic zeal is that it is usually prescribed wholesale, without any attempt at a differential diagnosis. One of the chief ways of improving the doctor's psychotherapeutic skill is to make him aware of his compelling apostolic function and so to enable him not to 'practise' it automatically in every case'* (Balint, 1963).

The doctor is immensely powerful and influences practically every detail of the patient relationship. Further, there is great potential in the use of the 'doctor drug'. The critical point is that the doctor - or the principal - learns to use the power and influence implicit in the role on a differential basis, that is, each relationship and each situation warrant a different attention, a special attention. One that does not rely on habitual responses, prescriptions or concrete thinking.

Isn't it likely that every professional, including school principals, begin and even continue in their career with an unshakable idea of how students/colleagues/parents ought to behave when faced with dilemmas and unusual problems? The Balint group is a frame through which the skills of reflective capacity in professional relating and school leadership can be thoroughly examined. However, up until now, this has not been researched or evaluated in the Irish educational context.

2.3 Educational leadership: 'an impossible profession'

Freud observed the 'impossible goal' of education, which he viewed as an attempt to shape a future which is inherently impossible to control or dictate (1937). He argued that the main goal of education is to force the child to suppress their natural, unconscious drives (her energy and aggression, for example) to conform to social norms. However, he framed education as a necessary, though inherently flawed, social endeavour that requires teachers to live with the uncertainty of their outcomes.

Contemporary educational leadership is enacted within policy, social, and emotional contexts which are more complex, rapidly changing, and challenging than perhaps in any previous generation (McCoy et al., 2024). These dramatically changed and changing settings within which Irish schools and their leaders operate have accelerated in recent decades and underscores a need for role-clarity and action as argued by Fullan (2006):

> *'My first conclusion, at this juncture in the Irish Education Reform agenda, is that principalship needs serious attention that it has not yet received. The time is right to change this and to follow through with action that will strengthen the role and impact principals can have in school improvement in the 21st century'.*

Meanwhile, policy-drift has mutated into policy-overdrive and Ireland's teacher professional learning agency, Oide, lists no fewer than fifty significant change events relating to curriculum, inclusive education, and regulatory compliance, each under the responsibility of the school leader, over the past two years (Oide quoted in JMB, 2025). The workload implications for school principals are clear and were identified in a recent ESRI report on the voluntary secondary sector.

> *'… there were repeated concerns over the demands placed on school leaders, the adequacy of supports provided and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention'* (ESRI, 2024).

Research suggests that the increasing dominance of technical–rational approaches in education has contributed to emotionally strained and less healthy school environments (Taylor, 2022). Scholars argue that policy-driven systems focused on compliance, accountability, and constant change have created emotionally charged schools and contribute to reducing leaders' autonomy and generating stress that has negative consequences for staff wellbeing and organisational culture. At the same time, the emotional landscape of schools has become more demanding: principals must navigate competing expectations, challenging interpersonal interactions, and the emotional needs of teachers, students, and families, all of which intensify the emotional labour of the role (McKay et al., 2025; McCoy et al 2024). Importantly, research on emotional contagion shows that leaders' emotional expressions significantly shape the climate of their schools; when leaders experience chronic strain, that emotional tone spreads, influencing both staff and student experiences (Taylor, 2022). Together, these findings indicate that overly technical models of school leadership risk overlooking the emotional dynamics that are central to creating conditions in which adults and students can flourish.

The delivery by teachers and leaders of the Department of Education and Youth's policy objectives in the domains of teaching and learning, and in leadership and management, are circumscribed in a quality framework, 'Looking at Our School' (Department of Education, 2022). Generally seen as helpful by educators, the framework's templated indicators of effective and highly effective practice nonetheless mirror the cognitive/rational foundations of state educational policy. However, not one of the statements of practice allude to social and emotional learning or to the relational underpinnings of truly effective teaching and leading.

An argument thus emerges at policy level for the need for professional learning and skills development in the affective dynamics foundational to effective school leadership. The rationale for expanding the scope of effectiveness rubrics such as 'Looking at Our School' to include social-emotional competencies is now well established and re-stated in 2023 by Daniel Goleman *'…we have learned the critical role that emotional intelligence plays in the development of school leaders' competencies',* and earlier argued by James and Vince, (2001):

> *'... schools are emotional theatres par excellence. The headship in those institutions is therefore an emotional practice. The role of the teacher is grounded in emotion, shaped by emotion and acted out in an emotional context. Addressing these issues is essential if the development of leadership capability of head-teachers is to be effective'.*

In the absence of professional learning opportunities around the affective dynamics of school leadership and the policy-level silence on any expectations beyond technicist-rational approaches to implementation, responsibility for developing insight, understandings, and reflective skills rests with individual school leaders themselves. It is into this lacuna that a network of Balint groups for school leaders emerges as a critically

important intervention. They offer a uniquely safe and peer-mediated space specifically designed to nurture the personal and professional growth necessary for effective practice, and align with the conclusions by Spindler and Biott (2005) over twenty years ago:

> *Reformers must acknowledge that it is the resilience and emotional engagement of principals and teachers rather than training programmes, which helps them to go beyond the call of duty when they are being subjected to relentless imposed change and to the ratcheting-up of targets. Instead of emphasising accountability measures and common sets of technical competencies for all principals, the focus should be on how to engender and support inter-generational learning in local districts.*

Furthermore, Gerhardt and colleagues (2025) have shown that emotional intelligence is not only linked to the relational aspects of principals' work but also to leader effectiveness. In the following section we outline how the Balint group process works for school leaders.

2.4 The Balint process

2.4.1 The atmosphere of a Balint Group case presentation and group discussion

The case presentation is reminiscent of a 'free association' in which it is permitted that the presenter omits facts, has second thoughts, makes mistakes, offers subjective distortions and so on. This provides the group with access to the dynamic factors shaping the case:

> *'...the aim should be to create an atmosphere in which anyone can speak unhurriedly, while the others listen with a free, floating mind, in which some silence is tolerated, and time is allowed to everyone to find out what he really means or what he really wants to say. Unexpected things can be said and examined at times without any drama, while at other times that are allowed to cause mirth, surprise, embarrassment, or even pain. But, whatever the group's reaction, the emotions emerging in both the reporter [presenter] and in his audience must be accepted and evaluated as expressions of unconscious processes activated by the report [case]* (Balint, 1963).

The aim is to help the members of the Balint group to become more sensitive to what is going on, consciously and unconsciously, in the other's mind when they are together. There is a field of clinical psychology that calls this 'Mentalisation'. The Balints noted how difficult it was to free up doctors from the history-taking, scientifically-objective listening they had been trained to do (see 1963, 302). The Balint group case presentation and group discussion is concerned with highly subjective and even personal events, often hardly conscious, or even outside conscious control. These thoughts, events and association profoundly influence one's attitude to life and to work in general:

> *It may safely be said that these events, happening all the time in everybody's mind are only in part sensible adaptation to the ever-changing environment; to a large extent they are governed by almost automatic patterns, originating mainly in childhood but influenced by emotional experiences later in life'* (Balint, 1963).

Thus, the first task of the Balint group leaders is to awaken, over the course of meetings, the members' unconscious awareness of these automatic patterns and enable them to study in greater detail how they influence and colour and determine their professional relationships as *'a limited, though considerable change in his personality necessary for his new skill'* (1963)

The Balints argued that intellectual and technical teaching has negligible effect on the process of awakening members' awareness or freeing up and easing up on the principal's tight grip on rational, logical and objective ways of solving problems and resolving relationship conflicts. The only way, the Balints' argue, is for the group to establish,

> *..an emotionally free and friendly atmosphere in which it is possible to face the realisation that one's actual behaviour is often entirely different from what it was intended to be, and from what one has always believed it to be* (Balint, 1963).

It is challenging for principals, trained and hired for specific skills and traits, to realise there is a discrepancy between their actual behaviour and their intentions and beliefs. However, if the Balint Group atmosphere and culture feels sufficiently connected to a collective identity and there is a feeling of cohesion, mistakes, blind-spots, and limitations of any individual member can be brought into the open and partially accepted. It is easier to accept one's limitations if the individual member feels understood and knows that the other members identify with similar limitations and their consequences in professional life. These mutual identifications arise through the professional crises, conflicts and upsets that mark out a career, but they are also uniquely personal to the individual because as with all professions, our behaviours are the expression of our personality and equally of our habitual mistakes.

The group leaders who seek to 'en-liven' the group must work at the edge of chaos, allowing for productive amounts of chaos and vulnerability but not so much disarray as to lead to fragmentation. This theory fits well with the Balints' original assumptions. Rubenfeld (2009) argues that such a balance can only be sustained through the leaders' engagement as active participants rather than adhering to the role of an outsider, as a neutral or as a detached consultant. In using a peer as a co-leader - the most common form of leadership in Balint Groups - there is significant potential for enlivening and for working at the productive edge of chaos.

2.4.2 The principal's emotional response to staff, students and parents

Nearly everyone went to a school and probably had at least one school principal. This is not dissimilar to the fact that most people have a doctor or at least are likely to have had a relationship with one doctor/GP. As referred to above, unconscious processes can be both positive and negative because feelings from past relationships and experiences can be unconsciously projected onto a current authority figure, like a principal. There is literature on this phenomenon in teaching since the 1960s. It is a common aspect of all human relationships, but most especially in situations involving authority figures or where strong emotional bonds exist, like in education. For instance, in the context of a school setting, students and staff will unconsciously project feelings they have towards their parents, or other significant authority figures in their lives, onto their school principal. And countertransference is an unconscious process in which a helping professional transfers feelings from the past to a person in the present.

For example, in a study on countertransference with teachers, a participant said,

> *For me it has more to do with looking at personality types and in some ways I am very conscious of how I am feeling about this student or that student or this kid and it has more to do with managing or not necessarily managing but rather categorizing certain behaviours and interactions. It's more like 'Oh my god, she reminds me of this person' … or 'Oh he's one of those.' … I don't know how unconscious it is to be honest; I am sure it's there so if it's really that unconscious I couldn't tell you. … You try not to do it, but I mean I think unconsciously I am pretty sure I do that, just to get a read of the land. You always try to move beyond that, but I think unconsciously we all do that* (Sherry et al., 2021).

One of the weaknesses in professional training (recognised by the Balints as far back as the late 1940s when they were working with social workers and other disciplines) is the lack of psycho-social education in relation

to unconscious processes in professional life. The unique contribution of the Balint Group is that it offers this without involving its members in any personal psychotherapy or analysis. The term transference is rarely used in Balint Group discussions with principals. Schön argues that expert professionals often rely more on implicit, 'in-the-moment' knowledge than on formulaic, scientific, or technical knowledge. He suggests that the most effective practitioners engage in a *'reflective conversation with the situation'* to manage unique, uncertain problems (1983).

2.4.3 Online Balint Groups

Balint Groups have a long history; however, Covid offered a unique opportunity to explore the experience of Balint participation online versus face to face. The features of shifting to a remote platform include adapting to technology both by members and leaders, access to broadband, varying time zones, the location and circumstances of each member, and managing confidentiality in the online space.

A small pilot study was conducted with a group of General Practitioners and Registrars in Australia of their online Balint experience (Koppe et. al., 2015). Across all of the measured scales used - professional isolation, confidence in medical skills and work-related affects - there were improvements for the participants. Overall, the study demonstrated that self-reported clinical psychological abilities and psychological sensitivity improved.

An Irish study was conducted with participants who moved from face-to-face to online Balint Groups via Zoom during Covid in April 2020 and continued online throughout the pandemic (Elzain et al. 2023). Results indicated that most participants preferred face-to-face rather than online as it permitted more meaningful discussion and exploration of emotional aspects. However, the facilitators identified the challenge to access group dynamics in the virtual environment.

Following the March 2020 Covid lockdown a study was published comparing online and in-person experience of Balint (Samnani and Awal, 2022). Four existing Balint groups for doctors in psychiatry moved to an online Balint, and two new groups were established virtually in specific response to the pandemic. Whilst the facilitators found it easier to manage the schedule of online group meetings, both participants and co-leaders experienced a range of losses, when compared with face-to-face. These included communication issues, particularly non-verbal information, with expressions and cues often resulting in what participants and co-leaders described as both artificial and unnatural.

2.5 Researching the effectiveness of The Balint Group: a gap in the literature

The Balint Society UK and The International Balint Federation (IBF) have consistently published qualitative accounts of Balint groups. Typically, these are beautifully written, creative approaches to communicating the content and atmosphere of a Balint group in action[1]. Other literature is varied across the application of Balint groups in medical training, allied health care professions and in education. There are studies showing that members of Balint Groups increase their capacity for empathy because of being in a Balint Group (see for example Gong et al., 2024).

The literature is consistent in that the aim of a Balint group is to explore difficult interactions with patients/colleagues/clients through case presentations and group exploration. The process is said to help members broaden their perspective on the difficulties in the relationship and how those difficulties influence the

1 See Balint Society UK list of Journals. Journal of the Balint Society | The Balint Society and The International Balint Federation Proceedings from Bi-annual leadership conferences. See International Balint Federation

presenter's overall perception of their practice, their competence and their interactions with colleagues/clients/students. There is a degree of consensus within the literature with Van Roy et al (2015) being helpful in clarifying the benefits. For instance, the systematic review of literature by Van Roy et al (2015) is helpful in clarifying the benefits but also the methodological issues.

The benefits of being a Balint group member include:

- Understanding the dynamics in a case
- Awareness of one's own feelings and the feelings of others
- Using a new conceptual/perspective frame in practice
- Competence in collegial/other encounters
- Recognition of different aspects of professional identity
- Increased self-awareness
- Interacting with colleagues/others differently
- Gaining knowledge of one's own limits
- Ensuring minimal interference of one's own psychopathology

Measures used to assess the benefits of Balint participation typically include psychosocial self-efficacy, burnout, and shifts in professional attitudes. The reviewers note that instruments used may not actually deliver the information on the outcome variables that are listed above, and this is partly because of the many different interpretations of the concepts and different methodological treatments. Van Roy et al (2015) note that different methodological approaches are a central reason for unclear assessments of the benefits of Balint group membership.

Variables that impact on the value of being a member of a Balint group include:

- The group process
- Participants' characteristics
- Leadership issues
- The way the group is adapted/used/modified
- Themes arising in the group
- The role and function of group evaluations
- Length of time as a member of a Balint Group (2 years or more is regarded as long term) – (See Van Roy et al., 2015)

In terms of short-term membership, Williams et al., (2022) using a small, self-selecting group, the authors examined the influence of participating in a six-month Balint group on new teachers in the public sector in the USA. Self-efficacy, experience with burnout, and intentions to stay in the role were explored using a mixed methods approach with pre- and post-testing and monthly reflection forms. The context was U.S. teacher shortages tripling since the 2012-2013 school year, to over 110,000 teachers needed in 2016. At the conclusion of the 2011-12 school year, 13.8% of public-school teachers left their position. Approximately 50% of the public-school teachers cited the inability to manage their roles as the primary factor for leaving. Notably, a parallel phenomenon may also be at work in the contemporary setting and recruitment of principals has, for some years, faced an equally acute crisis (Sugrue 2015). The results of this study in terms of methodological issues and findings are typical of similar studies with teachers and medics (see Van Roy et al., 2015).

There may be particular benefits of long-term participation in a Balint Group (over two years), and the literature (see Kjeldmand & Holmstrom, 2008) reports the following:

- Self-reported control
- More satisfaction
- Better quality of work

- Better cooperation
- Doing more training
- Better health
- Better attitudes towards difficult colleagues

To conclude, the experience of being a member of a group has potential influence but, as with many Balint related studies, the methodologies do not sufficiently extrapolate beyond the individual. Williams et al., (2022) argue that the collective effort in a Balint group can, however, affirm goals and a desire to commit to the teaching profession indicating that the group aspect of Balint is important.

2.5.1 What is so special about Balint Groups?

This question comes from a paper written by John Salinsky, published by The Balint Society UK in 2017. Returning to Michael Balint's original aim - a limited yet significant change in personality (see 1.8 above) - the paper asks: Are we all able to use this kind of experiential, deeply personal re-education? Do all clinicians actually want it? Should we encourage every colleague and trainee to join one of our groups? And can we truly claim that participating in a Balint Group will benefit everyone?

To explore the question of who benefited and by how much, the Balints and their colleagues developed a Rating Scale on which to map the doctors according to their degree of participation and subsequent enlightenment. The findings were presented and discussed in a book called *A study of doctors* (1966) which was written by Michael and Enid Balint and their colleagues Robert Gosling and Peter Hildebrand. Michael Balint concludes,

> *'... that 60% of doctors either did not see the need to join a Balint group or, if they did join, would be unable to tolerate it for long. Of those who stayed, 20% were 'able to make some use of the experience'. This left only 20% who 'will be able to acquire a commendable amount of diagnostic and therapeutic skill (1966).*

With this in mind, Salinsky (2017) developed a rating scale of benefits which is useful considering this study with school principals:

At the Bronze level

- You have the benefits of being in a small peer group generic with congenial colleagues
- You have a safe, protected space to talk about work, your feelings, even your mistakes. You are treated with warmth, and respect
- You are able to off-load unpleasant experiences at work to sympathetic friends who have been there too
- You can get advice from colleagues
- You feel that, now that you have the group to go to, work is not so bad after all

At the Silver level

You receive all the bronze benefits and,

- You develop more interest in those with whom you have professional relationships
- You have learned to be a better listener
- You are more relaxed at work, with a greater tolerance for difficulties and conflict
- You find work more satisfying, and difficult situations feel less persecutory

- You are less likely to suffer premature burn out
- In the group you still present the same sort of situations with whom everything seems to go wrong and each time you feel a little better. But, a few weeks later, '*oh dear, here we go again. Why didn't I learn from the mistakes I made last time?*'

At the Gold level

In addition to all the benefits of bronze and silver membership,

- You are aware of projected patient feelings
- Willing to accept a share of painful feelings: helplessness, anger, irritation
- With a little effort, you can contain the bad feelings, without retaliating angrily
- You have developed greater self-awareness
- You recognise why some colleagues disturb you. They remind you of a part of yourself you would rather not acknowledge
- You are sometimes able to 'identify' with a difficult colleague or parent– and then withdraw to regain objectivity

Salinsky (2017) finishes by saying,

> *'I guess most of us are around the silver level with periodic lapses into the bronze and occasional glorious moments of gold'.*

Figure 2.1 Rating Scale of Benefits

2.6 Conclusion

Across the literature, the use of the Balint process in education emerges as a distinctive and powerful framework for deepening reflective practice, strengthening relational capacity, and supporting the emotional demands of teaching and school leadership. Originating in clinical settings, the Balint model's structured, psychologically informed group reflection has been shown to create the conditions for practitioners to slow down and examine the interpersonal dynamics that shape their work in complex school environments. When adapted for educational contexts, this process offers leaders a rare space for perspective taking, meaning-making - one that foregrounds emotional experience, unconscious processes, and the relational complexities inherent in pedagogical and leadership encounters. The Balint process aligns closely with contemporary calls for emotionally intelligent and relationally grounded educational practice, including in leadership roles where emotional intensity, role ambiguity, and professional isolation are well documented.

Moreover, the literature suggests that the Balint approach holds promise as a buffer against burnout, providing a supportive space that validates professional struggles while nurturing resilience and professional identity. As educational systems confront escalating emotional workloads, increasing accountability pressures, and growing complexity in students' needs, the Balint method offers a structured form of leadership learning that attends both to cognition and affect - an integration often lacking in traditional professional development models.

At the same time, research also identifies important areas requiring further exploration, including how Balint groups can be most effectively facilitated outside clinical contexts, how they interact with school cultures, and how online or modified formats compare to traditional in-person groups. These emerging questions underline the need for continued empirical work to understand the conditions under which Balint practices are most impactful in education.

Overall, the literature positions the Balint process as a promising and conceptually rich approach to professional learning - one that centres the emotional, relational, and interpretive dimensions of educational work. Its potential to enhance reflective practice, support wellbeing, and cultivate more thoughtful engagement with the complexities of teaching and leadership makes it a valuable and timely contribution to contemporary educational discourse.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The Balint Group process has been used extensively since the 1950s, however, the introduction of Balint Groups for principals in the professional development of school leaders in the Irish context marks the first time it has been used in education. Being in a Balint group is a chance to shift away from the impulse to fix strange and difficult situations rapidly and defensively, towards an approach that takes more time, involves deeper reflection and is attuned to responding sensitively to self and to others. The hypothesis for this is that the long term Balint group member gradually imprints their group's capacity for thinking around a problem rather than pointlessly chasing a single solution. Members listen, absorb and relate the 'Case' to their own organisation and the highly complex situations that arise on a day-to-day basis.

There is limited understanding of how the process impacts on the development of leaders' personal and professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. This research project adopted a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) with the objective of evaluating the impact of Balint Group participation on the emotional wellbeing, professional development, and leadership capacity of participating school principals and to map the process relating to the principal-psychotherapist co-leadership model used. This qualitative case study is used here to investigate a phenomenon in its real-life context, especially as the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. This is particularly useful when the topic is new or not well researched such as the Balint Group process in the Irish context.

This chapter outlines the methodological choices the research team made, the process of data collection and analysis. We also describe how we addressed ethical concerns.

3.2 Qualitative exploratory study

This research aimed to map the process within Balint Groups and to evaluate the impact of participation with school leaders. Our research design drew on characteristics commonly associated with exploratory case studies, as outlined by Sibbald et al. (2021), Yin (2018), and Stake (2005). These characteristics include:

- Having a flexible approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within a specific context. The aim was to explore rather than to confirm a hypothesis. However, as it did not use multiple data sources it is not a case study, rather a qualitative exploratory study.
- Informing further study in the sense that this research represents a preliminary exploration into participation in Balint Groups and would hope to inform policy within the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) and the Department of Education and Youth (DEY) on supporting leaders in schools.

The theory informing this research is focused on leadership development and the psychoanalytic theory from which the Balint model was designed by Michael and Enid Balint as described in the previous chapter. This provided us with key themes to explore with participants. It also meant that we needed to collect rich qualitative data with a narrative focus where participants shared their experiences. When working with people in this way it is important that all ethical considerations were addressed and that there was an ethics in action approach to data collection where the wellbeing of the participants was always at the forefront.

We situated the research within the interpretivist paradigm due to the exploratory nature of the research (Kinvunja & Kuyini, 2017). It is interpretivist in that we contend that the reality of one's situation is constructed by individuals and that there are as many realities as there are individuals (Scotland, 2012), therefore, knowledge is culturally derived and historically situated (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Each leader brings their own agency to the process, and this agency is influenced by their past experiences and knowledge, their future aspirations of the kind of leader they wish to be and their current cultural, personal, and professional context (Priestley et al., 2015).

The research objective was to evaluate the impact of Balint Group participation on the reflective capacity, professional development, and leadership skills of participating school principals and group leaders.

To map the process relating to the principal-psychotherapist co-leadership model the following research questions were developed:

1) How does participation in a Balint Group for School Principals impact leadership capacity within a learning organisation such as a second level school?

    a) How does participation in a Balint Group for School Principals translate theory into practical and creative day-to-day school leadership?

    b) Does participation by a principal in a Balint Group support the development of leadership capacities across the social and cultural geographies of the school?

2) What are the key dynamics and impacts of the principal-psychotherapist co-leadership model as experienced within Balint Groups?

3.3 Theoretical Framework

Theories are vehicles for explaining and predicting. A theory is a set of interconnected propositions that have the same subject. The depth of the interconnectedness is in the logic of the relationships amongst and between the propositions, facilitating causal relationships and the possibility of making predictions. This section first summarises the propositions that make up the theoretical framework. Then, a possible evaluative framework is offered to assess the benefits of membership in a Balint Group.

UK coroner Heidi Connor ruled that the 'brutal inhumanity' of the school inspection system was a contributory factor to Headteacher, Ruth Perry's, suicide in January 2023 (Dakers, 2023; Walker & Whittaker, 2023). This case underpins the fact that school principals are not only the recipients of projections at the school or local level but also at the wider societal level mirrored in the education system. This aptly illustrates how school principals can and do become the focus of projections - idealised as saviours or denigrated and scapegoated as failures, particularly in times of uncertainty. This tragic case highlights how authority figures in society are subject to projections from local and wider social dynamics. These projections activate emotional experiences and relationships that influence current interactions. Today's Balint groups must be able to engage with the turbulence of individual, organisation *and* system wide complexity (see Redmond and Moller, 2017), as well as post-pandemic uncertainty.

School principals are not trained in psycho-social theories, nor are they trained to work through, understand or sustain a reflexive relationship with unconscious processes in professional life. All professionals (Argyris and Schon, 1974) bring espoused theories to relationships. These theories represent the beliefs, values, and principles that individuals and organisations have been trained in, and/or claim to follow. In the same way that the Balints observed just how strongly doctors held to their apostolic zeal, professionals hold on tightly to a way of managing relationships based on espoused theories of behaviour that expect and include rationality, logic, common sense and concrete facts. However, collective life is saturated by powerful emotional forces (Krantz and Maltz, 1997) like curiosity, surprise, love, affection and enjoyment but also resentment, irritation, fear, disgust, frustration, envy, paranoia, hatred, and anger. What actually happens,

then, is the professional has a Theory-in-Use: the unconscious theory that can be inferred from their actual behaviour (Argyris and Schon, 1974). The Balints argued that intellectual and technical teaching has no effect on the process of awakening members' awareness to these tacit and implicit theories, nor does it have any impact on freeing up or easing the doctor's, or the principal's, tight grip on rational, logical and objective ways of solving problems and resolving relationship conflicts.

The only way, the Balints argue, is for the Balint group to establish,

> *'...an emotionally free and friendly atmosphere in which it is possible to face the realisation that one's actual behaviour is often entirely different from what it was intended to be, and from what one has always believed it to be'* (Balint, 1963).

Over time, membership of such a group may lead to a limited though considerable change of personality in which it is not too difficult to accept one's limitations, particularly if the individual member feels understood and knows that other members identify with similar limitations and their consequences in professional life. These are the main propositions that support the workings and benefits of a Balint Group.

3.3.1 Possible evaluative framework

The literature review and theoretical frame suggests that there are three variables that determine whether members will experience these benefits from being a member of a Balint Group:

1) The quality of group cohesion
2) The quality of the atmosphere of the group's discussions
3) The amount of time spent as a member of a Balint Group (two years or more leading to more benefits)

And in more detail:

Being a member of a cohesive group with a connection to a collective identity may provide:

- The benefits of being in a small peer group generic with congenial colleagues
- A safe, protected space to talk about work, your feelings, even your mistakes. You are treated with warmth, and respect
- A setting in which the member can off-load unpleasant experiences at work to sympathetic friends who have been there too
- Advice from colleagues
- The feeling that, now that you have the group to go to, work is not so bad after all

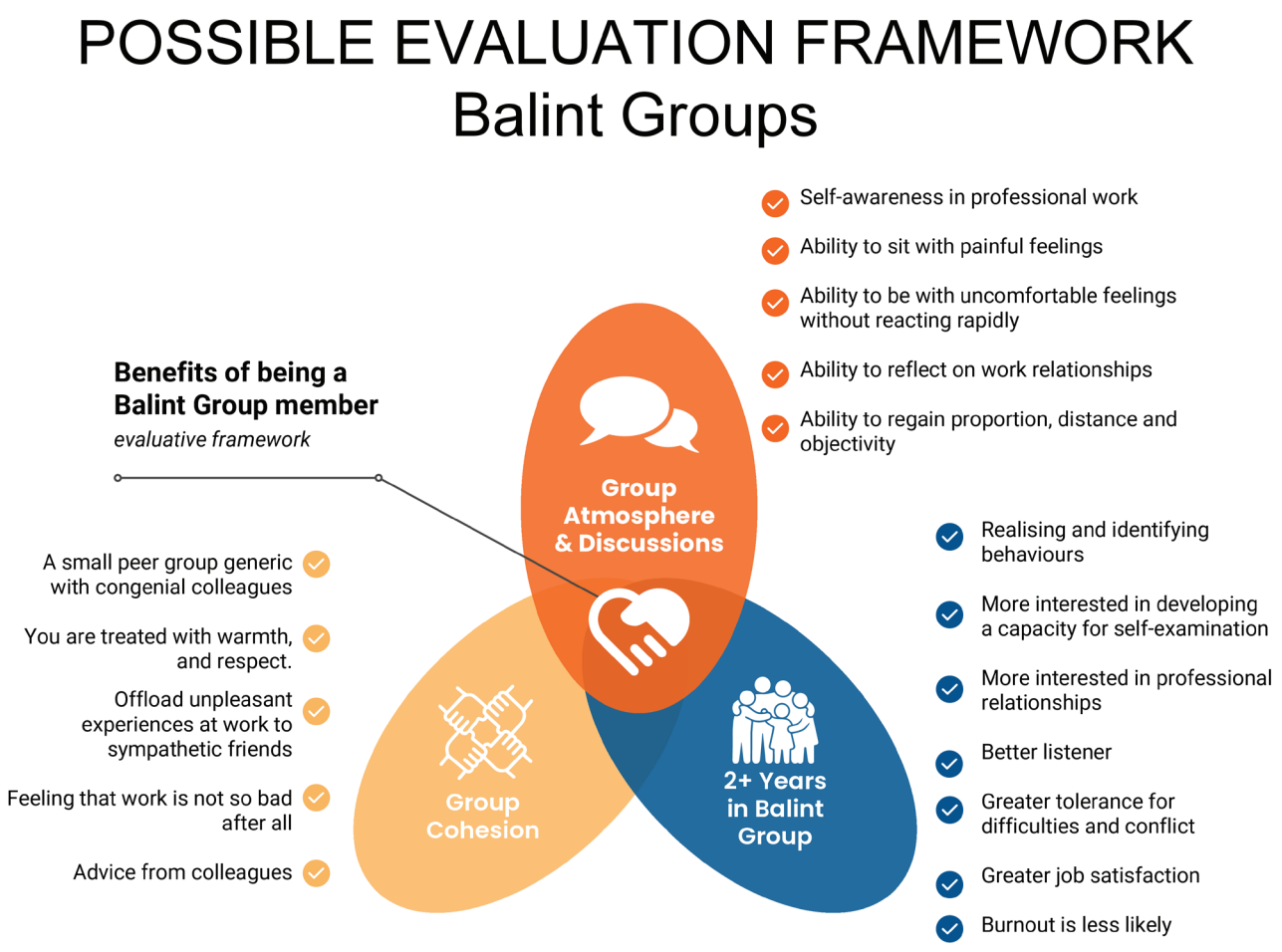
Spending 2 or more years in a Balint group may lead to

- The realisation that one's actual behaviour is often entirely different from what it was intended to be, and from what one has always believed it to be
- Being more interested in developing a capacity for self-examination regarding this difference
- Being more interested in professional relationships
- Being a better listener
- Feeling more relaxed at work, with greater tolerance for difficulties and conflict
- Work feeling more satisfying, appreciation of the role, and finding that, difficult situations feeling less persecutory
- A new cycle of work in which burnout is less likely

And, possibly,

- Self-awareness about projections and transferential feelings in professional work
- Ability to sit with painful feelings like helplessness, anger, irritation
- Ability to be with bad feelings, without retaliating angrily or feeling you have to react rapidly
- Ability to understand why some colleagues disturb you and to reflect on this personally
- Whilst at times you may over 'identify' with a difficult colleague or parent - in a short time you recover proportion and distance and regain objectivity

Figure 3.1 Possible Evaluation Framework, Balint Groups



3.3.2 Sample

Purposeful sampling is a commonly used technique in qualitative research (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan and Hoagwood, 2015). This involves identifying and selecting people or groups of people that have knowledge or experience about a topic of interest. The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) acted as gatekeepers, they contacted principal co-leaders and psychotherapist co-leaders and invited them to take part in the research and to propose potential group members as participants. An information sheet (see

Appendix A) and consent form (see Appendix B) was sent to the research participants. The sampling was purposive (Fogelman and Comber, 2007) where the research group applied their experience to select cases which were representative of the leaders who have participated in Balint Groups. Criteria for selection was applied to ensure a mix of the following:

1) Genders representative of the total sample of leaders
2) Single sex or co-ed schools
3) Mix of urban/ rural/ provincial town settings
4) School size small (up to 200 students), medium (up to 500 students), large (up to or over 1000)
5) DEIS[2] and non-DEIS
6) Fee charging and free schools

Details of the Focus Group sample details can be found in table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Details on participants in the three phases of the study

Participant group	Participant Name	Number of years as Principal	Number of years in Balint
Principal Group 1 (PG1) In Person	Julie Marie Olive Stephen	14 12 5 8	5 2 2 2
Principal Group 2 (PG2) On-line	Alice Emer Fintan Henry	20 10 11 6	10 6 7 3
Co Leaders Group (CL) On-line	Aoife Conor Denise (Psych) Martin (Psych)	13 16 - -	4 7 7 6
Early Leavers (EL) On-line	Alan Beverley Laura	10 10+ 5+	Less than 1 year Less than 1 year Less than 1 year

2 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) is a programme of additional supports provided by the Department of Education to schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities

3.4 Data collection

3.4.1 Focus groups

Focus groups have become a widely used qualitative research method across disciplines such as education, health, business, and social sciences. They are particularly valued for their ability to generate rich, interactive data through group discussion with people who have shared interest in the topic being researched (Burke and Dempsey, 2022; Sullivan and Forrester, 2019; Bloor et al., 2001). Krueger and Casey (2015) describe focus groups as a method that allows researchers to explore participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs in a social context. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups benefit from group dynamics, where participants build on each other's ideas, challenge assumptions, and co-construct meaning. When used with leaders, this discursive dynamic can reveal collective insights into organisational culture, decision-making, and strategic thinking.

Barbour (2007) highlights the flexibility of focus groups, noting that they can be used in exploratory, descriptive, or evaluative research. This makes them particularly suitable for an evaluative study such as this. They caution that it is important to be attentive to group interaction. In this research independent researchers conducted the focus group interviews. The research team believe that by designing the research to closely resemble the Balint group experience - i.e. holding a group interview with two researchers who co-lead - would provide robust and varied data. The participants may have known each other but were not in the same Balint group. The participants were encouraged to share experiences, differences and similarities from their Balint Group participation and the impact on their role as principal.

However, scholars also caution about limitations. Barbour (2007) cautions that group dynamics can sometimes suppress dissenting views, especially in hierarchical settings like leadership groups. Skilled moderation is essential to ensure balanced participation and ethical sensitivity. Focus groups are a valuable tool for exploring nuanced perspectives, especially among leaders. Their success depends on thoughtful design, skilled facilitation, and ethical rigor.

Confidentiality is especially problematic in focus groups because researchers cannot control what participants repeat or disclose after the session. If the discussion environment encourages over-disclosure, some participants may share more personal information than intended. The group setting inherently compromises anonymity since participants see and hear each other. These risks are heightened when the topic is sensitive or emotionally charged (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). For this reason, the research used researchers who were familiar with the Balint process and could work together in each focus group, being clear on the need for confidentiality and checking on participants throughout the process. In one case a participant asked to respond via an interview rather than a focus group and this was facilitated.

Data were collected in three different phases:

- **Two semi-structured members' focus group interviews: each for 90 minutes,** See Appendix C: Focus group interview 1 protocol
- **One semi-structured leaders' focus group interview: 90 minutes:** See Appendix D: Focus group interview 2 protocol
- **One Semi-Structured focus group and one interview** with principals who did not take part, or who took part in a small number of Balint group meetings and subsequently left. See Appendix E for protocol used

3.5 Ethical considerations and insider research

Research such as this, carried out by people deeply involved in the process has a number of implications in terms of ethics and power. The research is funded by JMB and is being conducted by a research team that consists of individuals who are deeply embedded in the Balint Group implementation. Sim and Waterfield (2019) argue that focus groups raise unique ethical issues that demand more thoughtful and tailored safeguards than those used in other research. Ethical practice in focus groups requires anticipation, flexibility, and active management before, during, and after the discussion, particularly when topics are complex, unpredictable, or emotionally sensitive.

Mercer (2007) considers insider research having the advantage of knowledge and familiarity with the context of the research, but this can sometimes cause you to struggle with 'making the familiar strange' (p.7). It can be argued that existing knowledge of the research site, culture and issues under consideration leads to more opportunities to collect richer, more nuanced data (Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzalez, 2020); see also Fleming, 2018). The key to reducing power issues with all research participants, regardless of status and existing relationships, is to establish trust at an early stage by acknowledging and describing exactly what the research is about and who the people involved are and what their roles are (Fleming, 2018). To facilitate this, we provided details about each of the researchers on the information sheet as the people involved in the research team. The focus group interviews were carried out by independent researchers. The entire team was involved in data analysis so that the familiar was 'made strange' (Mercer, 2007). Fleming (2018) goes on to advise that 'the perception of implicit coercion during recruitment must be addressed where any power relationships exist' (p.314). This is difficult for the research group, as the research team is known to the participants. In insider research this can often be difficult when the researcher is working alongside, or closely involved, with the potential participants and they are aware of your role as a researcher. The strategies for recruitment have considered this and the information sheet was very open on the role of the research team and the independent interviewers.

Individuals also need to have their identity protected. Pseudonyms were used. In addition to these, while we have criteria for our sample, pseudonyms were not associated with other sample details such as school location, size and so on as this will make protecting identity more robust. Although anonymity is guaranteed for participants in this study there is always a danger, with strategic deduction, that a participant will be identified, therefore, care with the information disclosed is important (Fleming, 2018). Independent interviewers will assign pseudonyms, and these will be stored on a password protected computer. The other researchers on the team will only have access to anonymised data for analysis. We respected any participant's wish to keep particular comments off the record.

A detailed audit trail was maintained with full records of all data collection, verbatim transcriptions, analysis, correspondence, member checking and reflection on the process was maintained. The group continuously monitored any issues of ethics and power during the research process to ensure that ethical practices and commitments were maintained. Ethics in action is crucial in exploratory case studies because these studies often involve close engagement with participants, flexible methods, and evolving research questions (Sullivan and Forrester, 2019). Table 3.2 describes how ethical considerations are embedded throughout the process in this research.

Table 3.2: Ethical Concerns	
Ethical concern	**Response**
Informed consent	Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, what participation involved, the right to withdraw at any time, how their data would be used. Consent was ongoing, during data collection, after data collection and so on.
Respect for privacy and confidentiality	Exploratory studies collect rich detailed data and protecting participants' identities is essential. We used pseudonyms, independent researchers carried out interviews, secure data storage, and we were careful when reporting to avoid indirect identification.
Reflexivity and researcher integrity	Researchers reflected on their own roles and potential biases. We were transparent about roles in the information sheet. We acknowledged how our roles might influence the case study, and we maintained trustworthiness and openness in interpretation of data.
Minimising harm	We were aware that emotional and reputational risks were possible in the research. The experienced researchers avoided probing sensitive topics, were sensitive to participants comfort levels, had regular check-ins with participants and had detailed support and referrals in case distress occurred in the information sheet.
Reciprocity and respect	Ethics in action also means giving back to participants and communities. We will share findings in an accessible way. We will acknowledge contributions and consider how the research benefits those involved.
Ethical approval	Granted by Maynooth University Faculty of Social Science Ethics Committee. Available on request.

(Adapted from BERA 2024, see also Burke and Dempsey, 2022, Sullivan and Forrester, 2019)

The research received ethical approval from Maynooth University Faculty of Social Science Ethics Committee (Ethics Review ID: 40278).

3.6 Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using reflective thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six step process. As this is a form of insider research, data were analysed both inductively and deductively where we looked for patterns of meaning in the data. In RTA the researcher is very much part of the analysis, and we acknowledge our bias and bring our own experience to the process. We do not talk about themes emerging, rather we develop them and map the process, and this gives the research trustworthiness. The adaptable, flexible nature of RTA is one of the benefits of the process, however, this can also mean that there is a danger that the research might not be theoretically strong (Sullivan and Forrester, 2019). To ensure rigor we approached the research design with a clear link to the Balint process and used the deductive *a priori* themes from the literature review such as:

- Coming to know something about oneself in guided Balint group discussions
- Tolerating not knowing and tolerating not knowing what to do
- The unconscious communications and dynamics in professional relationships and their impact personally
- The capacity for empathy
- Ability to sit with painful feelings
- The role of silence
- Expressing the fear and the disappointment of the professional role

In addition, we were keen to hear how participants described the Balint group meeting process itself, how it transacts, how participants experience it, and how they subsequently reflect on it. The fact that we identified these overarching *a priori* themes did not mean that we just looked for confirmation of them, rather it ensured that we were open to hearing participants describe their experiences through this lens the literature provided. We were open to new inductive themes being developed from the rich descriptions of the Balint process. It is important to acknowledge that inductive/deductive analysis should not be seen as a binary, rather it is a continuum and as Armat et al. (2018) advise, we are constantly moving between both kinds of analysis as we work with data.

Sullivan and Forrester (2019, see also Braun and Clarke, 2022) provide some pointers for being analytical in looking at your data (p.166).

- Comparing – looking for similarities and differences
- Consider how things are made sense of, defined or represented. For example, how did participants make sense of 'coming to know' and tolerating 'not knowing'
- Check implicit assumptions behind the discourse. For example, saying that 'total confidentiality doesn't exist' (PG1/ Alice)
- Try to draw out implications of what is being said – practical and theoretical

Table 3.3 gives further information on the process of data analysis used for developing themes from the focus groups.

Table 3.3: Data analysis steps for focus group transcripts

Steps	
Becoming familiar with the data	All six researchers read and made notes on the data – met and discussed some ideas that were developing
Generate initial codes	Identified segments of interest and coded these – generated a list of codes
Search for themes	Used colour to group codes and generate themes. Developed descriptions for themes.
Review themes	Back checking between codes and literature and a priori themes
Define themes	Refining and further defining themes and linking back to literature
Sharing the research	Developing papers and reports

Table 3.4: Themes and sub themes developed through data analysis of focus groups with participant principals	
The Balint group process - building cohesion	**Balint as a reflective space**
Confidentiality as Foundational *A Safe-Space to be Vulnerable* *Empathic Understanding* *Co-leaders Holding and Containing* *Silence as Incubator*	*Balint as a Unique Space* *Supporting and Developing Deep Listening* *Bridging the Gap between Insight and Action* *Symbolic Separation* *The Value of Attunement Skills* *Groups are Never Silent!* *'Verstehen' – Empathic Processing*
Leadership development, practice, and growth	**School Leadership as an Emotional Practice**
Detaching and Creating Space and Time *The Challenge of Extraction from School* *Legitimising Inner Work* *Sharing Vulnerability as a Creative Experience* *Perspective-Taking and Reducing Insularity* *The Balint Heuristic* *A Wider Range of Lenses* *Therapeutic but not Therapy* *Calling-out Martyrdom*	*Attacking Isolation* *Like me – Not like me* *Humour as Cathartic and Emerging from a Place of Safety* *Processing the Experience of Isolation* *Healing through Community* *The Cumulative Benefits of Participation*

Table 3.5: Themes and sub-themes developed through data analysis of focus group with Balint group leaders	
Managing group dynamics: Do the dynamics of co-leading a Principals' Balint Group guide and prompt opportunities for transformation?	**Co-leaders and the complex task of The Balint Group - the potential for misunderstanding**
Attending to Group Dynamics and Administration *The Parental Imago of the Co-Leaders* *Prioritising Insight over Solution-Seeking* *Discovering a New Language* *'Feel – Don't Fix!'* *A Unique Challenge for the Principal Co-Leader* *Light-Touch, Deft Leadership*	*Tentative Learning and Leading* *The Risks of Role Blurring* *Two 'Insider-Outsiders!'* *Understanding the True Nature of Dynamic Administration* *Living with Flux*

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations, design choices, and ethical considerations underpinning the qualitative exploratory study of Balint Groups for school principals. Given that the introduction of Balint Groups into the Irish educational leadership landscape represents an innovative and previously unexplored professional development approach, the methodological framework needed to be both flexible and robust. The qualitative exploratory design enabled the research team to investigate a complex, relational, and emotionally-laden phenomenon within its real-life context, consistent with the arguments made by Yin (2018) regarding the value of such designs for emerging or insufficiently researched topics.

Through an interpretivist lens, the chapter has demonstrated how the research design acknowledged the socially constructed nature of leadership experience, the multiplicity of realities held by participants, and the influence of past, present, and anticipatory professional identities (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Priestley et al., 2015). This paradigm was particularly suited to a study concerned with emotional experience, unconscious processes, and the personal meaning-making that unfolds within Balint Groups. It also allowed the research team to situate each participant's reflections within the broader psychoanalytic tradition from which the Balint model emerges.

The chapter also explained the study's purposeful sampling approach, which ensured a diverse and information-rich sample of principals and co-leaders. This strategy, supported in qualitative research literature (Palinkas et al., 2015), enabled us to gather nuanced insights from individuals who had varying lengths of engagement, school contexts, and leadership trajectories. By designing focus groups that mirrored the co-led dynamics of Balint Groups, the research design intentionally sought to preserve the relational and dialogic qualities central to the Balint method itself. Focus groups allowed participants to compare experiences, reveal shared understandings, and articulate both the benefits and challenges of participation, echoing Barbour's (2007) assertion of the value of group interaction in qualitative inquiry.

Ethical considerations were deliberately foregrounded throughout the research process. An 'ethics-in-action' stance was essential given the emotional vulnerability, professional risks, and deeply personal nature of the reflections shared by participants. Ensuring confidentiality, respect, and psychological safety was not only a procedural requirement but also a methodological imperative aligned with the ethos of Balint work.

Finally, the chapter presented the theoretical propositions and potential evaluative framework that link psychoanalytic concepts to leadership development. By identifying core variables - group cohesion, group atmosphere, and duration of participation - the chapter set the foundation for analysing how Balint Group engagement may cultivate greater self-awareness, emotional tolerance, reflective capacity, and relational insight among school principals. These propositions form the basis for understanding how Balint Groups may support leaders working in increasingly complex and emotionally demanding environments (McKay et al., 2025; McCoy et al, 2024).

Taken together, this chapter provides a comprehensive rationale for the methodological, theoretical, and ethical choices that guided the study. It establishes the groundwork for the subsequent analysis, where the voices of participants will illuminate how Balint Group participation shapes leadership practice, emotional wellbeing, and professional identity.

4 Findings

This exploratory case study set out to examine how participation in Balint groups influenced principals' leadership within their schools. Research in this area is scarce, making this study an initial step toward understanding the phenomenon.

The first section in this chapter - phase one of the research - presents findings from two focus groups with school principals (PG1 and PG2). This section is structured around four themes developed through data analysis. The four themes are:

- The Balint group process - building cohesion
- Balint as a reflective space
- Leadership development, practice and growth
- School Leadership as an Emotional Practice.

These themes are not definitive conclusions but interpretive lenses to think about and deepen understanding of the potential impact for engaging in a Balint group as a school leader. Consistent with the qualitative approach, the themes are illustrated through the voices of participants, using rich descriptions and direct quotations to provide insight into their experiences.

The second section - phase two of the research - presents findings on the experience of the Balint group co-leaders (CL). In both sections, we have included some insights from the third phase of the research with the early leavers (EL), the group who did not continue with the Balint Group process. See Table 3.1 for details on sample.

4.1 The Impact of the Balint Group Process for Participating Principals

4.1.1 The Balint group process - building cohesion

Without turning doctors or principals into psychotherapists, the success of a Balint Group is rooted in psychoanalytic thinking and in aspects of group cohesion. Together, they provide a logic for Balint leaders and members alike, to work to develop and sustain high quality group discussions. Aspects of effective group cohesion found in the data cohere well with Yalom's classic framework of therapeutic group factors - factors that are essential in building a cohesive group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020).

The processes of building emotional coherence and cohesion in a group are multi-factorial; optimism, belief in a process, and hope from the collective experience that relief will be found or gleaned in some way. Research shows that one of the mysteries of Balint is the impact of the collective experience (Van Roy et al. 2015). Yalom and Leszcz (2020) identified the importance of universality. This ties into a core finding from the data – the sense of not being alone and the experience of participants as less isolated and lonely. By providing cases to the group, members are sharing experiences that cannot be spoken about elsewhere, either because of sensitivity or because former friendly ears have gradually become deafened. It is also

good fun for members to see the relief on a presenter's face when they return to the group, having listened to the group discussion. Often, they return with a smile of gratitude and knowing and the refrain, *'I would never have seen the case in the ways you all saw it.'* This aspect boosts the confidence of members and presenters alike. Whilst the Balint group is not therapy, participants identified the value of corrective experiences. In this study, the data show that many participants have developed by replacing habitual responses, with thoughtful more nuanced responses. In this there is evidence of self-awareness and insight into behaviours and the relationships with others. Many cathartic effects are reported by participants including the release of pent-up emotional resentment which offers time to heal from hurt and upset. More questions were raised than answered through the data regarding the role of principal and its many extraordinary challenges. What is without doubt, is that the group process seemed to provide a setting in which existential anxieties and questions could be raised.

Group cohesion is possible when confidentiality emerges as the primary theme enabling all other benefits within Balint groups. Participants repeatedly emphasise that the concept of 'safe ears' – listening without external talking – this creates the essential foundation for authentic sharing. One principal articulated this emphatically:

> *The confidentiality piece is really, really important because I go to my Balint group, but I don't think any of my staff would know who else is there.* (Alice:PG2)

This trust develops gradually through consistent reinforcement and demonstrated commitment from all members. Alice continues:

> *I remember the silence. So, it's interesting to see how we have progressed and grown, probably as a group, because we do laugh an awful lot now. But I think that has come from the building of the relationship, and particularly the trust.* **(Alice:PG2)**

The importance of a confidential space is evident when principals share that they would never breach trust despite professional proximity. One participant noted:

> *If we were in business, you know it would be industrial espionage... If there was a breach of confidentiality, you know it would be devastating. It would be absolutely devastating.* (Fintan:PG2)

Evidence of such high-level trust emerges through participants' experiences of bringing cases without fear of criticism or judgement. Several principals describe this acceptance as transformative, noting the contrast with typical professional environments where expertise is presumed and vulnerability discouraged. One principal captured this dynamic:

> *Going somewhere where you can talk about the experience of a principal, when you are actually vulnerable is quite cathartic, where you can go somewhere where people really understand ... where there is a huge sense of humanity, where we come together to be human and not to have all the answers.* (Emer:PG2)

The acceptance stems from shared experience rather than expertise. Participants emphasise the therapeutic value of being with others who truly comprehend the unique pressures of educational leadership. This universal understanding creates permission for honesty. As Emer further explains;

> *It's just one of those roles that unless you're in the shoes you're wearing, and you're walking the walk, and you're talking the talk, that you don't feel other people can really understand where you're coming from, and you can go there and feel this real sense of acceptance.* (Emer:PG2)

Olive described it as *'I always left feeling lighter than when I arrived, and that's a huge gift'* (Olive:PG1). Marie described it as an ethic of care where you give and get given to, *'It's a very caring community, I think you feel that not only are you able to give, but other people are caring for you too. Yeah, very powerful'.* (Marie:PG1)

The creation of a safe space doesn't occur spontaneously but through careful structural elements and skilled co-leadership. Participants consistently highlight the importance of having both a principal and a therapist co-leading groups. One member praised this arrangement:

> *Mark has stayed with the group that I'm with. He's the co-facilitator, and he is a therapist too. We've just found everything really good. Good insights, good comments and a warm welcome feeling.* (Harry:PG2)

This structure allows anxiety to be lessened around practical matters, allowing participants to focus emotional energy on the challenging work of authentic sharing and reflection. The combination of skilled facilitation and reliable structure creates containers strong enough to hold difficult emotions and complex professional challenges. Safe spaces require time and intentional cultivation. The silence initially perceived as uncomfortable becomes recognised as a necessary incubation period for trust. As one principal reflected:

> *We had to build that relationship. So, I think sometimes you forget that. But this morning, when I was just thinking about it. I do remember that big room, and I do remember the quiet, but we've come a long way.* (Alice:PG2)

The journey from initial silence to deep connection demonstrates the sophisticated psychological work occurring within these groups, as participants move from cautious testing to authentic vulnerability and ultimately to sustained supportive relationships that extend far beyond formal meeting times.

Joining a Balint Group is voluntary and it is normal practice for principals to attend a Balint in their own JMB region. For some members this was problematic. Issues of safety, confidentiality, trust and the close proximity of other school principals from their region stirred a reluctance to share safely. Alan who discontinued his membership of Balint captures this sentiment recounting:

> *I found myself entering a clique of principals and you had a group of established principals in an area who knew each other, and it was more like an extension of a social event than anything. So, it was completely unsafe.* (Alan:EL)

While Alan is a proponent of Balint he asserts that the necessary conditions of safety and confidentiality for an effective group would be safeguarded by members attending Balint outside of their own JMB Region:

> *I would recommend it, but I would say if you're coming into it, you should consider a region outside of the one you're in, where it may be safer* (Alan:EL)

As the Balint model is only currently offered to principals within the JMB, a suggestion emerged to extend the model for Deputy Principal groups.

> *I've never heard about Balint for deputy principals…. It can be hugely challenging, and I think for deputy principals, they need support with that [role].* (Laura:EL)

A further consideration when joining a Balint group and a possible prohibition to join, is the cost to some schools due to affordability and budget restraints.

> *They [Boards of Management] would be afraid to pay money or make a contribution because they're using the school's funding.* (Alan:EL)

A practical element of participation in Balint is the challenge to attend in person. One principal recounted the time pressure of leaving and returning to their school during the course of the working day for face-to-face meetings. However, the switch to Balint online, while more flexible, presented other challenges - a limited capacity to be fully present, the risk of sharing safely, and the building of trusting relationships. Meeting online during school leaves exposure to interruption by others at the office door and encroaches on privacy. Laura remarks:

> *I suppose it's all about building relationships in these groups and a safe place to share, and I think online you don't have that connection.* (Laura:EL).

For the early leavers a recurring motif was safety with particular reference to confidentiality;

> *I wouldn't be fully confident of confidentiality. I couldn't say, hands on heart, that I'd be fully convinced that information you're sharing would be kept in that space, in that room, or online.…..* (Laura:EL).

Another principal suggests that reminders by the group leaders on the parameters and boundaries of the Balint process need to be more frequent and intentional, in order to;

> *…explain how a Balint group should be, explain professionalism, confidentiality, and does it again at a later date, and uses it, perhaps, as an opportunity for, when a new person joins, to say, 'I'm going to remind everyone that this is how this operates.* (Alan:EL)

Further observations included the uncomfortable experience of the 'chair-back' position where the presenter of a case is invited to sit slightly outside of the group while the case is considered by the remaining group members.

> *I just found it really pointless, to be honest with you. The idea of moving your chair forward. Exposing your soul and then sitting back. And nothing happening afterwards. Like, absolutely zero, zilch, nada, and nothing happened for me personally.* (Beverley:EL)

> *You want to respond, and then you say, 'No, Laura, don't, because they're just seeing it the way they're seeing it'. And you don't want to look as if you're defensive.…* (Laura:EL).

These data from early leavers serve to remind us that developing group trust and cohesion is not easy and needs the skills of an expert facilitator, in addition to the participant giving the time to the group to allow for the trust and cohesion to build. Effective Balint groups need high levels of intra-group trust to allow participants to share emotionally charged encounters.

4.1.2 Balint as a reflective space

Balint groups help to build confidential trusted relationships with peers, sharing professional and personal challenging moments in the educational workplace. This sharing in a contained space allows the members to recognise that others also face similar challenges, the supportive environment provided by these groups is crucial in creating space for reflective practice and providing members with a space to think (Sapunovp 2025:110).

There are few existing spaces in educational settings that are truly supportive places, Balint groups have been able to provide a space where…

> *…teachers especially have gained benefit from understanding better and improving their relationship with students and their parents in a deeper way. The aim however is not to level out all disharmony, nor to equalize positions nor to remove intense feelings of anger, envy, and impotence, but to bring them into conscious awareness and then use them to promote reflection, felt emotion and deeper awareness* (Otten 2017).

The experience of this study indicates a similar outcome with many principal educators. It demonstrates the ability to use the group to develop a deeper reflective capacity that helps thinking when in the group and when they return to their school.

The reflective process experienced by principals in the Balint group would indicate growth in self-understanding. They become better at being able to be silent, to hear better, to see better, and to experience the silence as an embodiment of the reflective learning space. One of the co-leaders made reference to the process of silent reflection from being something that was of dread, to a practice where she was able to actually emotionally 'feel' its impact;

> *I mean the silences in the Balint group initially, I found absolutely excruciating. I get to sit in a circle with people, and nobody says anything for 10 min. It felt like 10 weeks……. and it definitely makes you a much better principal, definitely a much better listener. And you hear more, so what the underlying thing is for other people. It might not even be verbalised. But you can. You feel it more because you're suddenly getting it.* (Lyn:CL)

Schon (1987) describes reflection as a process that is both 'in' and 'on' action. The principals in this study were able to give vivid examples of reflection of both. Members were able to sit with the reflection of others at their meetings but then later to take time to think things over, give it space, reflecting back on action.

> *…. you know, some of the issues that come up with ours (Balint group) and the discussions have been so profound that I have found, you know, that drive home and that I can sit and have a cup of tea and just thinking about it has allowed me the time to really digest it and mull over it.* (Olive:PG1)

There is also the learning to sit with the silence and what it can teach us as Aoife points out:

> *There's nothing longer than the 2 min silence at the start of the Balint meeting, you've had the cup of tea and the chatter, and the what's going on, and everyone sits there, and it does teach you patience… the silence is interminable. There's no question, a minute is a week, it does teach you patience!* (Aoife:PG1)

Part of the Balint experience is for the presenter to sit out slightly from the group after the presentation and to listen and wonder about their case. It means that there is not the opportunity for the presenter to clarify or add more information. This part of the process allows for a deepening of silent reflective thought, an opportunity to think about what was disturbing about the case in the first place. The presenter is handing over their problem to the group in a contained setting, allowing them the space to think about what they have brought, and the response of the group can be more tolerable. Martin, a co-leader, observed that

> *…when the principal comes back into the group they talk a lot at the end about isolation, not feeling isolated and going away [from the Balint group], not feeling isolated. And that's a real helpful part for themselves. I think, the actual Balint, the simple structure of putting somebody outside is very useful.* (Martin:CL)

To be able to sit with your thoughts is part of the practice of Balint, listening and attuning to peers. Many of those interviewed identified bringing back the reflective process to their workplaces and applying silence as a working skill. It allowed the principal to be able to mirror the experience of being listened to and to then use it as a way to develop better listening skills with staff as described by Lyn;

> *So I found it hugely beneficial from that point of view that you know, I stayed quiet, and I learned an awful lot more from the staff, and I felt it was able to help them a lot more, because I understood better where they were coming from, because I gave them the space to tell me… to learn how to sit silent.* (Lyn:CL)

Another example was Stephen who used the process in his workplace, modelling his experience from the Balint group by, for example, making space for students to speak for themselves:

> *…Just reflecting on it, that was a little bit like Balint in the way that they felt safe enough to actually say that in the room and how they were feeling and afterwards move on.* (Stephen:PG1).

Lyn also recalls her increased capacity to sit in silence with a staff member and how it began to change her practice and their response to her.

> *So, if you sit there as a principal, and you just obviously make the person comfortable, whatever and then leave, just leave loads of silence. People will fill it with whatever their real issue is eventually. If you can restrain your desire to fix everything very quickly.* (Lyn:LG)

The experience of silence in the group has encouraged principals to use it in their own practice and upon reflection Marie commented:

> *I think maybe the ability to sit with those uncomfortable silences, you know, in several settings in the school because, we do achieve so much more when people have time to reflect and sometimes that can be a bit uncomfortable, but that's OK. And, you know, and I think definitely that's a huge benefit from that.* (Marie:PG1)

It was noted by the participants that the Balint leaders were able to support their reflective practice when working with silence. Otten (2017) writes that it is important that the leader of the Balint group is able to allow for silence in the group, noting that *'breaks and pauses in the flow of conversation are valuable; silence has an important function and meaning'.* As one member pointed out…

> *I think maybe the ability to sit with those uncomfortable silences, in several settings in the school because we do achieve so much more when people have time to reflect and sometimes that can be a bit uncomfortable, but that's OK…. and I think definitely there is a huge benefit from that.* (Maire:PG1)

As reflected in this study. Gans (2010) reminds us to consider silence in the group as important communication and further states that *'silence and talking are two sides of the same coin as opportunities for learning'* (2010:150). This demonstrates a growing ability for principal educators to use the group to develop a deeper reflective capacity that helps thinking, both inside and outside the group.

The possibility of silence in the Balint group allows feelings to surface. Silence was a recurring theme in the research. The general feeling was that although the silences were uncomfortable, they were useful and productive. When first coming upon silence Fintan remarked:

> *I used to hate the silences at the start when we're waiting for a case if nobody had a case and it used to become a thing in my head, and I said, 'Right, jeez do I have to fire in something here in order to break the silence? And there was a reflection in our group - the co-leaders were looking for feedback and I mentioned that [the silence], and it was addressed at the next meeting. And now I'm quite comfortable with uncomfortable silence and I could sit here all day and in silence and just think…* (Fintan:PG2)

Perhaps what Fintan is describing is moving from a more reactive model to a more responsive one. Steirnlieb (2018) reminds us that a holding space with competent leaders allows for silence to be heard and to experience intellectual and emotional freedom. The case presentation functions as a primary mechanism for deep reflection within Balint groups. When presenting challenging situations, principals engage in structured reflection that differs profoundly from everyday problem-solving. One participant described the emotional impact of presenting a case:

> *If I bring a case forward, it's not that I feel justified, or I feel vindicated in the approach that I took. It just gives it credence. It puts flesh around... maybe puts me into a headspace that is more reflective.* (Harry:PG2)

The Balint process is particularly supportive when addressing acute situations. One memorable case involved a principal managing a school colleague experiencing a personal stressful episode. The presenter felt 'reassured' and participants recognised that the processing helped him *'settle faster than if he went alone*

to handle it.' Crucially, the depth of reflection extends beyond presenters to all participants. Listening to cases creates empathetic processing opportunities. As one member explained:

> *Often you learn a huge amount about looking at a case for other people. So, the feelings that you have, you know, the empathy... that emotion is... it's really hard to fight that.* (Emer:PG2)

Some of the early leavers spoke of disappointment with the Balint process. These expectations were very particular to their own expressed needs and circumstances at that time.

> *…the whole formula just wasn't what I needed, or wanted, or expected… What I would really have loved to have seen would have been other principals speaking openly about their experiences which were similar to mine, and equally, being allowed to speak to other principals about experiences that I had, how I solved them, and how I would have been able to potentially offer advice outside the group, or even within the group.* (Beverly:EL)

Others expressed preferences for different reflective and supportive experiences.

> *I absolutely think it has value. However, I attended the leadership support where you had an individual mentor through the Centre for School Leadership, and I found that much more worthwhile, to be perfectly honest with you.* (Laura:EL)

Balint groups provide a uniquely structured reflective space in which practitioners can slow down, listen deeply, and explore the emotional and relational dimensions of their work. Within this holding space, silence, attentive witnessing, and collaborative meaning-making allow participants to recognise the complexity of their encounters with others and to develop greater self-awareness and psychological flexibility. In this way, Balint groups act as a restorative counterbalance to the pressures of professional practice, supporting both reflective capacity and well-being, and enabling practitioners to reconnect with the human core of their work in a space not focused on problem-solving.

4.1.3 Leadership development, practice and growth

The relentless and unending demands of both being a principal and performing the tasks of the role were alluded to by participants in the preceding section. As a consequence of the pace and intensity of change in the contemporary leadership landscape of education, it is incumbent that school leaders not only engage with the external world but also seek a deep understanding of their own internal landscape. This capacity for personal and professional reflection - and, crucially, the deliberate creation of space and time to support it - acts as an anchor for sustainable leadership development, enabling educational leaders to remain grounded amid the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions of contemporary education (LeBlanc, 2018).Reflective development and practice leading to personal and professional growth has a long tradition in education extending back to work of Dewey (1933) and augmented by Schön (1987, 1995) inviting educators to intentionally reflect on themselves working in complex contexts to generate new understandings. Although teacher reflection on, and in, educational practice has long been recognised as tool for exploration, Balint for educators is unique as a model of a reflective practice, scaffolding participants for insight not on instruction, developing perspective not prescription and moving to feeling rather than to fixing, simply a space for 'somewhere to stop and think' (Fogel and Moller, p.25, 2019).

The ability to initially listen without judgement or comment to a presented case in Balint and to resist the compulsion to be, as one participant described, a *'jumper in'* emerges as a key learning for participants. This capacity is a counterpole to the natural and often demanded response by others from the principal, as Stephen remarks, to be 'fixers and problem solvers in our role.' Detaching from the habitual urgency

for resolution requires Balint participants firstly to enter a space for deep reflection and 'moves beyond superficial and predominant rational approaches' (Daniëls et. al. p140, 2023). Emer remarks,

> *Sometimes when you're in Balint, part of the process is that people will kind of look at the situation from other perspectives as one of the things often in schools is that people are looking for an immediate reaction, an immediate answer and Balint has taught me to learn that sometimes you need to step back, think about the situation you're in, almost sit outside the circle.* (Emer:PG2)

The opportunity of Balint participation and how it is structured addresses the need for time and space for personal and professional development as observed by Marie;

> *And it's wonderful to hear another set of perspectives, maybe that you might not have considered to give that time and space because I feel that often the school day… it's so hectic. There isn't that kind of reflection time. The school year is so hectic. So, it just gives you that little bit of time to step outside and to actually have that reflection piece. And I think it's really powerful and really beneficial.* (Marie:PG1)

The distinctive efficacy of Balint in contributing to school leaders' growth and development is captured in Olive's endorsement of Balint when she articulates,

> *But this is a very unique and nuanced job and I can't think - certainly in my own experience - I can't think of anything else that's addressing that particular requirement, and that particular development and that emotional development and emotional awareness and skill-building of how to manage other people's emotions in a respectful and caring way…* (Olive:PG1)

She proceeds to also identify the singular contribution to Balint not only to her own professional development but also as an effective impact in the general life of her school.

> *And it is a trickling down and so probably for such a small piece of CPD it is probably one that is having the most momentous effect in the school. And it's not being addressed anywhere else, so there's no overlap in my experience. I'm not seeing an overlap with my Balint experience with any other type of training or CPD or that's available to principals.* (Olive:PG1)

Similarly, Harry recognises this contribution in respect of building his own resource capacity towards a toolkit for learning.

> *I've never gone to a [Balint] meeting that I haven't walked away with something and it's just building up a toolkit with even somebody else's experience becomes your experience in a voyeuristic type of way in so far as that you're hearing the things that you can relate to and say, 'actually, something like that did happen, or nearly happened'. And therefore, as a result of that, I can take this away as part of my toolkit.* (Harry:PG2)

Notably here, Harry speaks of going to and coming away from a Balint meeting which illustrates a critical aspect of the Balint structure, namely, that it is an 'out-of-school' facilitated process. The practical challenges to this arrangement for already overburdened and time-poor principals has been addressed earlier. Other research examines secondary school leaders' engagement in professional learning activities and the role that personal and school-context factors play in shaping their workplace learning; such studies emphasise the significance of onsite, practice-embedded contexts (Veelen, Sleegers & Endedijk, 2017). This potential for Balint to be an effective tool for learning is tempered by Fintan's comment that to be of benefit, Balint needs a critical mass, and participants need to bring some level of prior experience as a principal.

> *I think if they [organisers of Balint] could avoid having just twos or threes or fours attending, as the dynamic totally changes, so just keeping the pipeline going. You need to be in the job a while, you know, not a new appointee. You need to be there a while. You need to learn a lot, and*

> *then you need to learn what's driving you completely bonkers, and you can't do that until you're there a while [as a principal].* (Fintan:PG2)

The contribution and perspective of others in the experiential group learning context of the Balint process and the conditions of a trusting and safe space, offer participants legitimacy to explore and reflect on the range and power of emotional content. Julie observes,

> *And I found that, you know, talking about emotions in a group setting is difficult because I don't even like to acknowledge emotions to myself, so that, I think, is a vulnerability as well.* (Julie:PG1)

One of the interviewed co-leaders of a Balint group remarks that the understandable fear of being exposed and appearing vulnerable can be surmounted with participants. Using imaginative language is an invitation to be unfettered and free in speaking one's mind. Along with trust and confidentiality this is the bedrock for the group's speculative wondering;

> *It's that invitation to engage with it, and how they engage with it. So, I think for me, that starts out with language and getting them to think about it in a different way, because people come to it with a desire to help, a desire to fix. So, it's trying to get past the fixing bit. But it's also trying to get underneath the empathy bit because I think in the early stages of the group the empathy bit kind of paralyzes it a bit like nobody's willing to say, 'How the hell did you get yourself into that situation?' …So, I think it's a lot to do with the language of imagination* (Denise:CL)

This theme captures how participation in Balint groups supported principals in developing the capacity to view situations through multiple lenses. Participants emphasised the importance of listening attentively, appreciating others' experiences, and cultivating emotional intelligence. A recurring insight was the value of hearing diverse viewpoints, which enabled leaders to reframe situations and foster empathy - particularly in emotionally charged or ethically complex cases. Perspective taking is understood as the deliberate cognitive process of imagining a situation from another person's standpoint (Da'as, 2023). Ku et al. (2015, p. 79) describe it as *'the active cognitive process of imagining the world from another's vantage point or imagining oneself in another's shoes to understand their visual viewpoint, thoughts, motivations, intentions, and/or emotions.'* Da'as (2023), drawing on prior research, notes that a lack of perspective taking can negatively affect team integration, increase stereotyping, and heighten conflict. Empathy is central to this process - the notion of 'walking in someone else's shoes' underpins a leader's ability to consider alternative perspectives. While participants did not explicitly name emotional intelligence, their accounts suggest its development through the practice of perspective taking. As Da'as (2023) contends, *'consideration of other perspectives leads to effective interactions between and within groups'* (p. 737).

Participants consistently described Balint groups as creating space for growth and broadening horizons beyond the insularity of school life. As Olive explained:

> *Schools by their very nature are quite insular, you know, we all went to school, we're in a school, we're running a school. I think everyone knows how school works …so an outside voice is important actually to give that sense of balance and perspective. Otherwise, we're just looking at ourselves all the time and not really growing I would say. So, it works really well I think.* (Olive:PG1)

Marie echoed this sentiment:

> *We are sometimes in a trench, you know and that outside perspective is really healthy for us, I think.* (Marie:PG1)

Perspective-taking requires both emotional and cognitive growth. Several participants when reflecting on their work described engaging internally with 'mini Balint processes', for example, pausing, reflecting, and

considering others' viewpoints before responding. This shift often involved moving away from a solution-focused mindset toward attending to emotions. Stephen articulated this transition:

> *I suppose we're all fixers and problem solvers in our role and the way that the focus was changed more into looking, not giving the solution… looking at the feelings, the emotions, examining and you having that benefit of being a fly on the wall… very interesting.* (Stephen:PG1)

For some, this represented a significant learning curve. Julie reflected on the challenge:

> *And I'm not good at emotion or touchy-feely stuff. I am kind of more stoical, you just get on with it. And so, I found that, you know, talking about emotions in a group setting is difficult because I don't even like, acknowledge emotions to myself, so that…I think that's a vulnerability as well. And yeah, you're mixing your emotions with wanting to jump in and say 'well, actually I had that issue last year and this is how I sorted it out'. So that balance is difficult as well.* (Julie:PG1)

Her account illustrates the journey toward developing the skills and attitudes necessary for perspective taking. Sharing cases and hearing varied responses expanded participants' repertoire of interpretive strategies. Marie noted:

> *It's wonderful to hear another set of perspectives maybe that you might not have considered.* (Marie:PG1)

Olive similarly observed:

> *But people would talk it out ... There were nuances that maybe they would bring to something that you were struggling with and you went 'Oh actually you know, I hadn't thought…and so every Balint meeting I went to, when I left, I left with fewer problems than I came in with even if I wasn't the one presenting the case, I always left feeling lighter than when I arrived, and that's a huge gift.* (Olive:PG1)

Participants frequently described how these exchanges reframed entrenched views and influenced practice.

> *I think what always resonates with me is the different perspective that somebody will always have, that alternative perspective that something that you never thought of… because in the midst of dealing with something we don't get the time to think about all the different perspectives and that's what hits me all the time, is that there'll always be an alternative perspective. That just turns the situation on its head.* (Julie:PG1)

Harry highlighted the practical impact:

> *There'd be six or seven people in the Balint at any one time. And you know, you're hearing five or six different voices coming back to you with different perspectives. And it's like, 'Okay. Actually, I didn't think about it that way.' You always pull something away from it. And it does affect your day-to-day running.* (Harry:PG1)

For some, articulating their own case aloud shifted their perspective. Julie explained:

> *Expressing it out loud to another group… actually just changes your focus within yourself just by verbalising it out loud… actually just made the situation easier for me to deal with'* (FG1).

Alice similarly noted:

> *'When you come out that you shared something, you've gotten the different perspectives, because if you're in a difficult place in a personal life then you definitely won't see the perspectives, all of the perspectives.* (Alice:PG2)

Stephen captured the essence of perspective-taking:

> *It's putting yourself in the shoes of other people. Not the solution, the emotion. Again, literally naming what it is like for those other parties and exploring that.* (Stephen:PG1)

Participants consistently acknowledge that Balint isn't a therapy group whilst simultaneously describing profoundly therapeutic effects. This paradox reveals important truths about how safe spaces function in professional contexts. The distinction matters because it positions Balint as legitimate professional development rather than personal treatment, reducing potential stigma whilst preserving therapeutic benefits.

One principal articulated this complexity powerfully:

> *We're very clear it isn't a therapy group, but the supports... like when I was under pressure at different times, I knew I could pick up the phone to a member in that group or two members whoever I chose to be honest with you and say 'I really am overwhelmed with this. I don't know where to turn' and you know it could be a case I take to Balint.* (Alice: PG2)

The therapeutic impact manifests through supportive relationships and processing opportunities rather than clinical intervention (Gabrielson and Looi, 2024). A particularly powerful concept that developed from the data was processing what one principal called *'the human cost to the person of the principal, of dealing with very difficult human situations'.* (Emer:PG2)

Balint creates rare space for acknowledging professional sacrifice without glorification or complaint, simply naming reality. As Emer eloquently describes:

> *When you're listening, the cost of carrying that kind of responsibility in how you act and how you present yourself, and through different very complex issues that arise at Balint, always kind of leave ... often reflecting on the toll that it takes on the person carrying that particular cross.* (Emer:PG2)

This processing allows experiences to be validated rather than be typically dismissed or minimised. Participants describe expectations to manage without support, maintain composure despite extreme stress, and sacrifice personal wellbeing for organisational needs. Balint provides a counter-narrative space where such sacrifice can be named, examined, and processed rather than simply endured. The emotional work involves moving from isolation in suffering toward collective acknowledgement and mutual support.

4.1.4 School Leadership as an Emotional Practice

The emergence of a distinct thread of narrative recounting the experience of apex-role isolation combined with an oppressive workload will come as no surprise to school leaders themselves or from any engagement with the ever-growing literature base in the field of school principalship. In the present context, the recent ESRI study of the voluntary secondary sector in Irish education (Caroll, McCoy & Ye, 2024, p. 204) concluded:

> *'… there were repeated concerns over the demands placed on school leaders, the adequacy of supports provided, and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention:*
>
> *The job of principal is very, very demanding, very challenging, emotionally draining.* (Stakeholder interview)
>
> *Schools are being asked to do more and more and more. … I'm 54, and I'm not going to be principal when I'm 60. I do that and I'll be dead by 61… It's not the workload per se, it's the absolute bombardment of workload … this job will kill you if you stay too long.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)'

Principal isolation, an inflating administrative workload, and potential consequent burnout are also internationally recognised phenomena, as identified in this American study:

> *'The day-to-day stress alone is enough to detract from your wellbeing. Burnout can be the result. We have noted that nationally, the average tenure of a principal is about four years, and nearly one in five principals, approximately 18 percent, turn over annually. Often the schools that need the most capable principals, those serving students from low-income families, have even greater principal turnover'* (Patti and Stern, 2023).

Participants in the focus group interviews brought added levels of specificity to these broader trends and repeatedly established linkage with the 'safe space' of their Balint group as sources of connection and reassurance, as articulated by Stephen in the initial principals' focus group:

> *You know it can be very, very lonely and overwhelming because you just spend your day … they come in, people dump, constantly dump their problems on you. There is that aloneness, if I can put it, doing the job, which, when you know other people are doing it, it doesn't become a lonely job then.* (Stephen: PG1)

In the same contribution, Stephen went on to note the reassuring effect of discovering other principals were navigating similar challenges to one's own, and illustrated the *'very precious freedom not to react, not to say anything at all':*

> *There are sometimes that I would have gone in, and I would have engaged and contributed and maybe presented, or there's other days I was quieter. And maybe that's because of other stuff going on or whatever, but it's the experience of just being there, having that safe place and I suppose you know, hearing other things and challenges ... that we're all the same.* (Stephen:PG1)

Discovering difference of experience also emerged from the narrative, perhaps offering otherwise unavailable insights into more challenging contexts than one's own, as noted by Fintan in the second focus group:

> *My first Balint meeting, I discovered that there are schools which don't have money, you know, which again, first of all, was a searingly honest contribution from a colleague in the group. And I went, well, 'that's one problem our school doesn't have. We have other problems but that's one problem I don't have. Okay. Wow, I'd hate to have that problem. So, I'm doing okay".* (Fintan:PG2)

Reassurances aside, evidence, again offered by Fintan in Focus Group 2, also emerged of the relief offered by humour in group discussions, and in particular, the role of dark humour as cathartic:

> *We as principals don't tend to laugh a whole pile. But God we laugh nonstop at this place, and there's some deadly things happening. You know the situations, the cases could be awful, and somebody will crack a joke. Somebody else will crack another joke and off we go, you know, so that when I joined, that kind of shocked me. I said, 'Oh, my God!' I thought, this is going to be a moanfest and the exact opposite, you know? So that in itself will make you go even if you have no interest in bringing a case, or you know, if things are going swimmingly (which will not happen), you're still going to go because you know that the atmosphere there will be just that right balance between examination of a case, helpful feedback, and then the craic.* (Fintan:FG2)

Such sharing of vulnerabilities relating to oneself or one's school will only, of course, emerge where group members experience a consistent sense of safety – a particular responsibility of the group leaders. One contribution from Lyn at the co-leaders' focus group, interestingly demonstrated an awareness of the reticent member and their sense of safety:

> *'It's very democratic, really as well, because obviously you'll have the group, and there'll be some people that are naturally very quiet, but I feel everybody gets an opportunity to participate and to present cases. And it's unlike other arenas where you have people - the loud, the person with the louder voice - tends to get more airtime, whereas I think, because of the silences, and because people get a chance to contribute, I've certainly seen that in our group that people who I know are extremely quiet and tend to even be quite shy, and would have a very quiet style, participate extremely well, because again, they feel safe and they can speak and they get an opportunity to speak without being interrupted'.* (Lyn:CL)

The experience of participating in a Balint group will, most likely, have little or no impact on reducing a principal's workload. Indeed, that challenge of getting out to meetings in the first instance was seen by Julie, sharing in the first focus group, as adding to the time management burden:

> *'No, it's the time. It's being able to extricate yourself from the school. That's the biggest issue, the year gets really busy. The weeks get really busy and there can be times I just can't. And that, that feeds into Principal workload'.* (Julie:PG1)

The wider narrative, however, points to value of prioritising attendance and participation in the group in spite of the struggle to extract oneself from the school, and the sense of overwhelming busyness:

> *It's just got a lovely mix, and that's just maybe the people. I don't know what it is, but it probably is the people, and we all make each other laugh. So that's a big thing for me, and I never ever thought setting out that that would be a theme of my experience in Balint. The other thing I would say, is the shared experience. It's a loneliness antidote. Our job is very lonely even with two deputy principals. It's just a unique experience being a leader of a voluntary Catholic secondary school. And frequently you will find yourself in your head trying to work out what's next. And when you go to Balint for a number of years, you will probably think of something that came up in a previous case, and that alone will say I'm not alone'.* (Fintan:PG2)

A complex interplay now becomes evident across our sub-themes, with strands of narrative voicing, for example, 'the burden of leadership; isolation and overload' linking with the sub-theme of 'vulnerability and emotional honesty' as in Alice's recounting of her experience of leading during the Covid pandemic:

> *When I was under pressure at different times, I knew I could pick up the phone to a member in that group, or two members, whoever I chose to be honest with, and say 'I really am overwhelmed with this. I don't know where to turn' and you know it could be a case I take to Balint. And then, you know, there's a learning, and you take that, and that's one less thing for you to worry about.* (Alice:PG2)

The networking and high-trust effects of Balint participation thus extend beyond the confines of the meeting itself and further illustrate the in-reach and out-reach phenomena at play across the wider experience of group participation.

Multiple participants describe this isolation using powerful language that reveals psychological pressure. Reiterating Fintan's point above:

> *It's a loneliness antidote. Our job is very lonely even with a deputy principal, two deputy principals. It's just a unique experience being a leader of a voluntary Catholic secondary school.* (Fintan:PG2)

Balint groups provide a space to name, explore, and process this isolation rather than suppressing it. Participants describe experiencing relief through shared recognition. There is validation within the group that isolation isn't personal failure but inherent structural reality of the role (Howard & Mallory, 2008).

The collective engagement within Balint groups creates a cyclical process that demonstrates how strength in role emerges from community rather than individual intervention. This process operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms that build upon one another, creating profound opportunities for processing challenging experiences and professional growth.

This cyclical process demonstrates how Balint groups function through collective engagement rather than individual treatment, with healing emerging from community rather than intervention. The power lies not in any single element but in the continuous flow between witnessing, recognition, perspective-shifting, connection, and integration (Bleakley, Boyle and Cooke, 2007).

Participants describe tangible effects on their wellbeing extending beyond immediate case discussions into sustained resilience. When directly asked about wellbeing impacts, responses prove unequivocal. One principal stated simply:

> *Simply put, yes. I mean, it just ties back into what I spoke about a couple of minutes ago. It does genuinely every single time without fail you'll walk away with something more than you went into the room with and it does affect, of course, it affects you.'* (Harry:PG2)

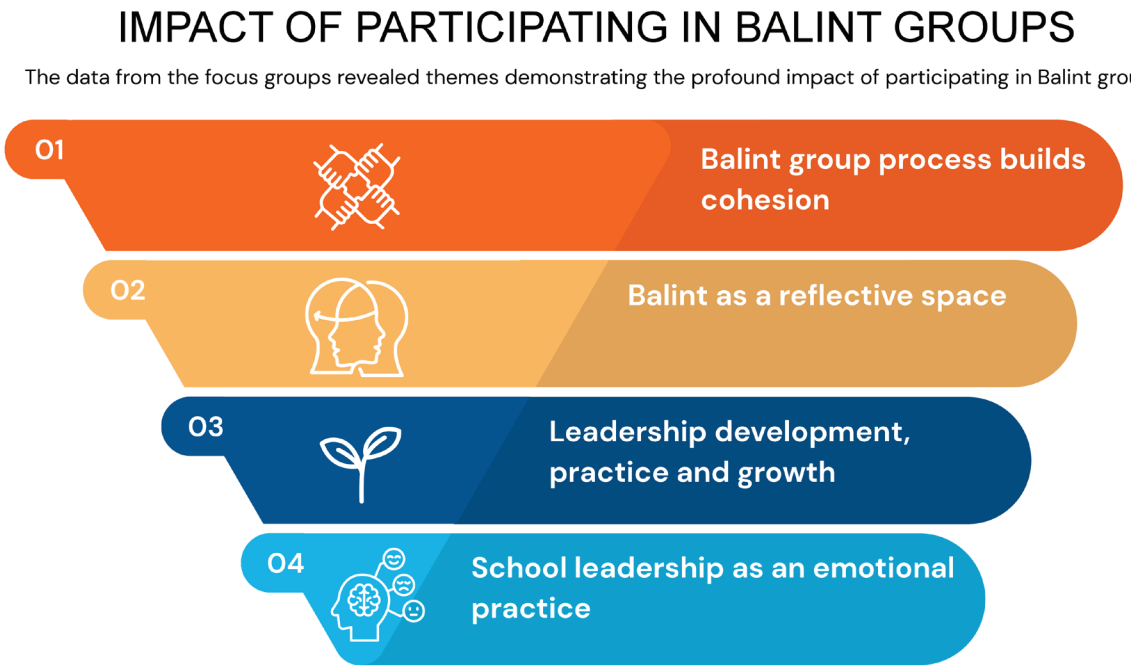
The effect appears cumulative rather than episodic. Participants build internal resources over time - libraries of cases to reference, relationships to draw upon, practices to employ. This accumulation creates a foundation for sustained wellbeing rather than temporary relief, contributing to long-term professional resilience that enables principals to navigate the complex emotional landscape of educational leadership with greater confidence and support.

4.1.5 Learning from the experience of participants - conclusion

The dialogue captured in Focus Groups One and Two highlights that Balint groups for school principals create transformative environments where confidentiality, structured reflection, and peer support combine to turn vulnerability into strength, isolation into connection, and professional challenges into opportunities for growth and learning. These elements do not function in isolation; rather, they interact to produce an impact greater than the sum of their parts. In doing so, they create a comprehensive support system that sustains school leaders as they navigate the complex emotional landscape of their work. Balint groups operate simultaneously on multiple levels, addressing immediate professional challenges while also meeting deeper personal needs for connection, understanding, and validation in what participants consistently describe as an intensely isolating role (Howard & Mallory, 2008; Kannai et al., 2024).

Participants frequently described the Balint process as integral to their professional development, precisely because it engages the human dimensions of leadership work - dimensions often overlooked in traditional education, training, and support structures. The focus group data revealed a series of themes that demonstrate the profound impact of participating in Balint groups. Figure 4.1 presents the themes identified and discussed above.

Figure 4.1 Impact of Participating in Balint Groups



These data indicate a significant influence on leadership practice, decision-making, and personal wellbeing, with principals describing the Balint process as their most valuable professional development experience (see also Rahimi and Arnold, 2024). These impacts will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter.

4.2 Co-leading a Principals' Balint Group

The traditional Balint co-leading model brings two distinct professions (a psychotherapist and, in this application of Balint, a school principal) together to perform a single task; the facilitation of a professional reflective practice group.

4.2.1 Managing group dynamics

The task of managing a Balint group's dynamics is the most important determinant of a successful Balint group: one that produces effective case discussions through which the presenting principal can take in different perspectives and ideas and distance themselves from the upsetting and personalised aspect of a case. It is the co-leaders' joint and separate attention to the dynamics and the administration of the group that produces the structure and culture for a Balint Group discussion.

> *I think it is an expertise. It's like you know, a bit like a good class. If the class goes well, it looks like the teacher has just done nothing but there's a huge amount of preparatory work that has gone into it. I think the same thing with this. It is the expertise leading through it which made the whole thing flow very well.* (Olive:PG1)

If the qualities of a good co-leadership partnership are in place (e.g., bringing and drawing-out instinctual creative responses; not panicking; displaying parental unity) then the principals, who are ordinary leaders in

extraordinary situations, will be enabled to more effectively keep terror at bay. This is because the experience of participating in a group held and contained by such co-leaders developed, over time, a distinctive reflection on practice and an awareness of the unconscious processes at work across the socially complex theatre of the school (Redmond, 2016).

However, this is no easy task. The aim of a Balint Group is to facilitate group discussion in which members gradually learn to tolerate feelings of uncertainty, not knowing, and doubt. This is to counter the habitual nature of professionals whose automatic reaction when presented with a complex dilemma is to find the answer and to know what to do. The Balint Group model assumes such dilemmas are rarely solved this way. Rather the model assumes that dilemmas and the upset associated with them are rooted in misunderstandings, unconscious communication, unspoken fears and desires, and possibly, a power imbalance.

The co-leaders' job is to guide and prompt a group conversation on foot of a dilemmatic presentation, with the special instruction not to give advice and not to work out a solution. The aim is for the group's 'shared zone of communication' to gradually develop until they are able to converse freely using a new language and a new mood. This largely involves putting into words, imaginings, wonderings, visuals and speculations about what was heard in the presentation. Formerly, much of this would have remained largely unspoken, but, in the special situation of a Balint Group, it can be put into words. Another way of thinking about this is that in every communication there is a hierarchy of responses. The Balint Group model encourages impressions that might not normally be aired, to rise upwards from the levels below (Bion, 1962: 89).

> *I found it fantastic to be honest…a great support and very thought provoking.* (Maire:PG1)

> *What always resonates with me is the different perspective that somebody will always have, that alternative perspective that something that you never thought of.* (Julie:PG1)

> *And the self-awareness to know what you're bringing to the party, like what agenda, what negative views or agenda or preconceptions, or what you bring and giving you...before any meeting, be it with a kid or be with the parent, I do give myself a couple of minutes… ok... 'Hold on now, what's that…what is their perspective?' and that changes the tone of the meeting. And that everything in a very... no matter what the conflict is... it's calm.* (Olive:PG1)

This process involves the leaders inviting members to focus on feelings and to speculate about what is really happening for those involved in the presentation. Given that the normal and habitual nature of principals is to fix and solve, to think rationally and logically, to rely on what was done before (whether it worked or not) and always, always to know what to do, it is reasonable that the co-leaders' job is a deeply complex one. The enormous pressure coming from the group is to solve, to fix, to be logical and to be rational. One of the co-leaders is a principal and it is reasonable to assume that this urge is hardwired into them as much as it is hardwired in the members. It takes time, training, support and lots of practice to unravel and loosen this automatic reaction. The pressure to solve aspects of a presentation is always manifest in the group.

> *...principals by their nature fix things. We go into things and we fix things, and we see things in front of us, and we fix them, and whether we're in the profession for 6 months or 16 years we are wired to address things and fix them and try to make them better. So, it does take a certain amount of retraining the brain in the Balint room.* (Aoife:CL)

> *…it's trying to get past the fixing bit. But it's also trying to get underneath the empathy bit because I think in the early stages of the group the empathy bit kind of paralyses.* (Denise:CL)

> *But we are absolutely lethal for wanting to fix things. So, there'd be a lot of reminders you know, through each section of the meeting.* (Lyn:Cl)

Both leaders are in fact managing a difficult tension in this dynamic – to facilitate a wide ranging and open discussion but not to smother the mood with instructions that feel counter-productive. This is a complex

task. Amid a group discussion, there is a constant and sometimes insatiable pressure to solve the issues at the heart of the presentation,

> *Yeah, on a couple of occasions when the fix is really strong, and it's not proving possible to steer people away from it. But we have said and it's only on a couple of occasions, but we've said, 'tell you what, we will leave 5 min at the end of this for you to throw all your fixing whoever it is. So can we, just with that in mind, can we focus on the feelings, how that has worked.* (Denise:CL)

4.2.2 Co-leaders and the complex task of The Balint Group - the potential for misunderstanding.

The study provides evidence of emerging leadership skills and a capacity to guide and to lead effective discussions in line with the Balint Group model. The evidence suggests, however, this is an emergent and tentative understanding alongside a slow and gradual adoption of complex leadership skills. There is a heavy, but also a confused reliance on the psychotherapist co-leader. The mix of professions as co-leaders is clearly a benefit to the task of leadership but it is not yet clear why.The findings indicate a need for Balint-specific leadership training and supervision for all co-leading pairs;

> *But I think, the other thing I want to say there is I had a problem with the term 'dynamic administrator'.* (Conor:Cl)

> *Oh, it's not hard. You pick the venue, pick the dates, book it in, send reminder emails. That's not hard. And see, I think sometimes when you put language like dynamic leadership or something around it, I think you call it something that it's not. But as a principal in a region, it's, you know, 4 phone calls and a few emails. It's not hard.* (Aoife:Cl)

Whilst the organising of the Balint group is given importance, it is unclear who holds authority for its dynamic administration nor is it clear that both parties understand the emotional role of dynamically administering to the needs of a Balint Group.

> *Yeah, I wouldn't see it in any way, taxing. I don't see the co-leadership as being anything other than another administrative task. It is phone calls. It's booking a hotel. And it's sending emails as a reminder, you know, or popping something into the Balint WhatsApp, or whatever you know. It's not taxing. It is a bit dispiriting when people don't show up or don't tell you they're not coming. I mean, I absolutely understand, sometimes you can't come and don't tell you, but it dilutes the effectiveness of the experience. There's no great… certainly from my end… there's no great skill involved.* (Aoife:CL)

The psychotherapist was mostly but not always viewed as the expert and the role of 'organising' is felt to be largely handed over to the principal. On the psychotherapist's side, however, there may be a view that the principal is too busy for this work. It is not clear from the data what happens to the leadership relationship or to the group if one of the co-leaders assumes a disproportionate responsibility around some aspect of leading a Balint Group.

4.2.3 How does the co-leadership model work in practice?

All the JMB Principal Balint groups are co-led by a psychotherapist and a school principal. Interdisciplinary leadership of a group brings a host of advantages but also complexity and the potential for misunderstanding.

> *I think it takes more work when you're working with somebody because you have to tic-tac with them, whereas, you know, in some ways it's easier on your own because you're just doing it yourself, but there's a richness to having somebody doing it with you and there's certainly… it gives me more confidence that stuff gets picked up, you know. There's stuff that I just don't see sometimes that the principal co-leader would see, and vice versa. So, there's definitely that piece in it, or sometimes, you know, we'd be sitting in supervision and we just realise, 'Oh, I didn't think that. I thought something else'.* (Denise:CL)

The Balint group method has its origins in psychoanalytic theory (Balint, 1957). The role of the psychotherapist brings expertise to the emotional and relational undertow in the group. The psychotherapist is trained to observe, monitor and contain complex group dynamics like anxiety, power, trust, conflict, group roles, interpersonal relationships, the sense of psychological safety and dependability, and of course cohesion – an authentic and shared sense of meaning and purpose.

The school principal is a peerless professional. They bring a unique perspective to the professional relationships within a school setting, and a deep understanding of the complexities of the school ecosystem – the nature of the interconnected relationship between parent, staff, and students (McKay et al., 2025). The principal is used to navigating school-wide challenges and fostering professional development and working through the difficult and emotionally charged situations that arise in educational roles. McKay and colleagues (2025) describe how work grounded in 'emotions, relationships, and ethics of care' are 'aspects of leaders' labour which are undervalued and overlooked' (p.673).

The psychotherapist is trained in, and used to, operating and managing precise methods of group work. As discussed, (See Section 2.2), Michael and Enid Balint designed the particular features of this group method to show doctors that it is their relationship with the patient that is more, or as important as the medical treatment/drug being prescribed. For professionals to work with this radical idea, they need to be able to tolerate uncertainty and the extremely uncomfortable feelings that come with not knowing what to do. Every Balint group is saturated in anxiety as a result and a principals' Balint group is no exception.

The tasks of managing any reflective practice group for professionals can be thought of in terms of dynamic administration. In theory, the leaders' attention to dynamic administration, securing an accepting environment and attending to norms will promote the professional development of the group members by enhancing their self-awareness, empathy, and understanding of the emotional aspects of professional relationships. This view of administration establishes an appreciation that the practical tasks make a contribution to all the dynamics of an effective group. It also implicitly invites cooperation, consent, and leadership based on the situation or the context rather than on absolute authority. Ideally, over time, the group members, having imprinted the frame of a Balint group will mirror its essential features in their behaviour and help out when it goes off course. which it inevitably will.

> *Sometimes when you're in [school] after Balint...one of the things often in schools is that people are looking for an immediate reaction, an immediate answer and Balint has taught me to learn that sometimes you need to step back, think about the situation you're in, almost sit outside the circle. If you put it in that regard, you actually take stock for a minute and you kind of go, 'Hang on a second. I'm going to need a bit of time to actually reflect on that and come back to you with an answer because I want to think about it from the perspective of everybody that I'm dealing with'.* (Emer:PG2)

> *I think it's the encouragement you know, to think about, to wonder about and we would often kind of say something like, 'Well, how did it feel in your body like? Where did you feel it?' And so, it's that invitation to people after the case has been presented and the presenter has sat back. It's that invitation to engage with it, and how they engage with it. So, I think for me, that starts out with language and getting them to think about it in a different way, because people come to it with a desire to help, a desire to fix. And so, I think it's the language. And then the invitations to, 'Well, what do you think it was like for this person or that person', so keeping it back at the relational bit?* (Denise:Cl)

The co-leaders' job is to work together to build this understanding of the Balint group and then ensure its sustainable functioning over time. This includes a set of administratively dynamic tasks.

To facilitate the group's development and all the dynamic reverberations, the leaders must accept that they will often feel lost in the group's process. This is a normal part of the group's maturing towards a capacity to have a richer discussion that is so very different from the kinds of discussions they have in the other parts of their work life. Every Balint group takes time to develop this new language and this new way of thinking – it is important for the members to feel contained and held;

> *What I must compliment, and again it's the expertise of the facilitators. I'm not watching my watch, but for some reason they seem to get the timing very good. So however, they're doing this, I admire them.* (Stephen:PG1)

4.2.4 The role of training and supervision to support the co-leaders

Supervision was spontaneously mentioned in the data. This is a strong signal of leadership development. The experience of Balint supervision, which is generally done in a group, assists leaders to understand what is happening in a group and gives the leaders a safe space to talk together, and with peer co-leaders. Supervision may also be misunderstood as a place for a principal to present rather than as the place for the leaders to learn how to work together and to guide and direct the group in line with Balint intentions.

> *But if supervision is to work, your head really does need to be right, to be going for it. And I think maybe looking at a space for principal co-leaders to contribute in the Balint meetings would be, might be a better support.* (Aoife:CL)

> *But the supervision, then, is around the Balint, you know, supporting you as a Balint leader. Isn't it, so?* (Conor:CL)

> *We used the early days of supervision time for exploring and probably deepening our own understanding of each other. We've complete trust in each other. So that has been very kind of rewarding for me. I suppose just touching on the principal co-leader not presenting a case.* (Conor:CL)

> *…I think the supervision is really... it's another safe space. And it's that listening and speaking. You know you get a chance to do both.* (Denise:CL)

> *Well, the supervision piece. Now I've only been to one, but I thought that was very helpful.* (Lyn:CL)

> *I would have gone to the supervisions with X and that's where I got my support and I think probably that was the more attractive element of becoming co-leader, was that you got that kind of support and attention.* (Aoife:CL)

4.2.5 Co-leading a Balint Group - conclusion

There is strong evidence that the co-leading model - and the composition of the co-leader pairing - is supporting the essential dynamics of a functioning Balint group for school principals. When the rules of a Balint group - its framework - are made explicit, they appear to provide relief, containment, and the conditions for a robust and reflective group discussion. What is less clear from the data is whether the co-leaders share an explicit, mutual understanding of these dynamics. A second area of ambiguity concerns the practical administration of the group: the division of tasks, the allocation of responsibilities, and the rationale for who undertakes particular aspects of the work.

It is also noteworthy that Balint leadership training was not mentioned in the data. Ireland is in the unusual position of not having had its own established Balint Society until very recently. To date, Balint leaders - as well as many group members - have typically affiliated with the Balint Society UK, which offers a structured leadership pathway and a wide range of training opportunities. Ireland also hosts a long-standing Balint Symposium, organised alternately by colleagues in Sligo and the Balint Society UK, which convenes a parallel event in Belfast. At the time of writing, a Balint Ireland Society has just been established and is in the early stages of development.

5 Discussion and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the main findings developed from the data and considers their implications for research and policy. We begin by interpreting the findings in relation to the broader context of leadership in schools. In doing so, we present a series of questions that arise from the analysis - questions that may be of particular relevance to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working within the complex landscape of school leadership. Following this, we outline a set of tentative recommendations organised across two domains: policy development and future research.

For policymakers, we offer recommendations that respond to both the strengths and challenges articulated by school leaders. These suggestions focus on how policy frameworks might more effectively support leaders' professional and personal development, with particular attention to wellbeing, reflective capacity, and collaborative support structures.

Under future research, we identify the gaps illuminated through this study and highlight areas where further investigation could deepen understanding of leadership experiences, emotional labour, and the role of reflective group processes such as the Balint model. We also provide signposts for potential research projects that could build on and extend the contributions of this study.

5.2 Discussion of findings

This section discusses the main findings developed from the data presented in the previous chapter. We begin by interpreting the findings in relation to the broader context of leadership in schools under six discussion points/questions we developed from the thematic analysis.

5.2.1 The Balint group process - building cohesion

Main findings

Confidentiality as Foundational: Confidentiality emerges as the primary theme enabling all other benefits within Balint groups. The importance of this confidential space becomes evident when principals share that they would never breach trust despite professional proximity.

A Safe-Space to be Vulnerable: Evidence of such high-level trust emerges through participants' experiences of bringing cases without fear of criticism or judgement. Multiple participants describe this acceptance as transformative, noting the contrast with typical professional environments where expertise is presumed and vulnerability discouraged.

Empathic Understanding: The acceptance stems from shared experience rather than expertise. Participants emphasise the therapeutic value of being with others who truly comprehend the unique pressures of educational leadership.

Co-leaders Holding and Containing: The creation of a safe space doesn't occur spontaneously but through careful structural elements and skilled co-leadership. Participants consistently highlight the importance of having both a principal and a therapist co-leading groups. This structure allows anxiety to be lessened around practical matters, allowing participants to focus emotional energy on the challenging work of authentic sharing and reflection.

Silence as Incubator: Safe spaces require time and intentional cultivation. The silence initially perceived as uncomfortable becomes recognised as a necessary incubation period for trust. The journey from initial silence to deep connection demonstrates the sophisticated psychological work occurring within these groups, as participants move from cautious testing to authentic vulnerability and ultimately to sustained supportive relationships that extend far beyond formal meeting times.

Discussion point/s, question/s

- To what extent are current group co-leaders aware of these dynamics in terms of their role in building cohesion?
- Has an 'intentional cultivation' of these factors been left to co-leaders to discover for themselves, if at all, and should professional learning opportunities be provided to make such expectations explicit?
- Does a group member need to be aware of the trajectory of development milestones afforded by their engagement with the Balint process?
- What impact might the uncovering of processes emerging from this research have on the hitherto unstated psychodynamic 'beats' of Balint?

5.2.2 Balint as a reflective space

Main findings

Balint as a Unique Space: There are few existing spaces in educational settings that are truly supportive places. Balint groups have been able to provide a space which promotes reflection, felt emotion, and deeper awareness that helps thinking when in the group and when they return to their school.

Supporting and Developing Deep Listening: The reflective process experienced by principals in the Balint group would indicate growth in self-understanding, they become better at being able to be silent, to hear better, to see better, and to experience the silence as an embodiment of the reflective learning space.

Bridging the Gap between Insight and Action: Reflection is a process that is both in and on action. Members were able to sit with the reflection of others at their meetings but then later to take time to think things over, give it space, reflecting back on action.

Symbolic Separation: Part of the Balint experience is for the presenter to sit out slightly from the group after the presentation and to listen to the group discuss and wonder about their case. This allows for a deepening of silent reflective thought, an opportunity to think about what was disturbing about the case in the first place.

The Value of Attunement Skills: To be able to sit with your thoughts is part of the practice of Balint, listening and attuning to our peers. Many of those interviewed were able to identify bringing back the reflective process to their workplaces and applying silence as a working skill.

Groups are Never Silent!: The possibility of silence in the Balint group allows feelings to surface. Using the experience of the silence in the group has encouraged principals to use it in their own practice. It was noted

by the participants that the leaders were able to support their reflective practice with regard to the work of silence.

'Verstehen' – Empathic Processing: The case presentation functions as a primary mechanism for authentic reflection within Balint groups. Crucially, the authentic reflection extends beyond presenters to all participants. Listening to cases creates empathetic processing opportunities.

Discussion point/s, question/s

- Administrative and leadership demands have all but eliminated the capacity of overwhelmed principals to reflect on their roles and relationships. In the absence of any policy-level workload alleviation, how can we convince principals of the value of safe-space reflection as afforded by Balint?
- Most JMB schools have an explicit Christian ethos, leading to a 'servant leader' disposition within voluntary secondary principalship, even if this remains unstated. Is this research uncovering evidence of self-sacrifice and martyrdom in principals, and are such tendencies being challenged by the Balint experience?
- Can we explore (or is there evidence of) the emergence of a 'Balint heuristic' that principals are acquiring and deploying in their practice? Components may include space-creation; allowing silence to happen; awareness of projection; embedded reflection on action – and the sequencing of these elements to enhance practice.

5.2.3 Leadership development, practice, and growth

Main findings

Detaching and Creating Space and Time: The capacity for personal and professional reflection, and more pertinent, carving out space and time for this process is an anchor of sustainable leadership development, enabling educational leaders to remain grounded in the volatile-uncertain-complex-ambiguous (VUCA) of education. Detaching from the habitual urgency for resolution requires Balint participants firstly to enter a space for deep reflection and moves beyond superficial and predominant rational approaches.

The Challenge of Extraction from School: The Balint structure is an 'out-of-school' facilitated process bringing practical challenges for already overburdened and time-poor principals, but for Balint to be an effective tool for learning there needs to be a critical mass of participants.

Legitimising Inner Work: The contribution and perspective of others in the experiential group learning context of the Balint process and the conditions of a trusting and safe space, offer participants legitimacy to explore and reflect on the range and power of emotional content and processes in the work of the principal and subsequently introduced into Balint.

Sharing Vulnerability as a Creative Experience: Sharing of vulnerability is seen as cathartic as it opens up possibilities of experiencing empathy and acceptance from one's peers. This understandable fear of being exposed and appearing vulnerable can be surmounted with participants using imaginative language in the assurance that trust and confidentiality is the constant bedrock for the group's speculative wondering.

***Perspective-Taking and Reducing Insularity*:** Participation in Balint groups supported principals in developing the capacity to view situations through multiple lenses, reframing situations and fostering empathy - particularly in emotionally charged or ethically complex cases discussed during Balint meetings. Participants consistently described Balint groups as creating space for growth and broadening horizons beyond the insularity of school life.

The Balint Heuristic: Several participants described engaging in 'mini Balint processes' internally - pausing, reflecting, and considering others' viewpoints before responding. This shift often involved moving away from a solution-focused mindset toward attending to emotions.

A Wider Range of Lenses: Sharing cases and hearing varied responses expanded participants' repertoire of interpretive strategies. Participants frequently described how these exchanges reframed entrenched views and influenced practice.

Therapeutic but not Therapy: Participants consistently acknowledge that *'Balint isn't a therapy group'* whilst simultaneously describing profoundly therapeutic effects. This paradox reveals important truths about how safe spaces function in professional contexts. The distinction matters because it positions Balint as legitimate professional development rather than personal treatment, reducing potential stigma whilst preserving therapeutic benefits.

Calling-out Martyrdom: Balint creates rare space for acknowledging professional sacrifice without glorification or complaint, simply naming reality. Participants describe expectations to manage without support, maintain composure despite extreme stress, and sacrifice personal wellbeing for organisational needs. Balint provides counter-narrative space where such sacrifice can be named, examined, and processed rather than simply endured.

Discussion point/s, question/s

- The dominance of Western, androgynous, cognitive-rational paradigms of leadership and management is both reflected in contemporary policy expectations, as well as being a seductive theory-of-action to those in leadership positions. That a parallel, though sublimated, set of emotional forces are at work in the lifeworld of the school requires a shift in understanding and the emergence of parity of esteem in acknowledging such realities.
- The confidential foundations of Balint groups, while essential, can nonetheless lead to a reduction in awareness of the potential for participation to enhance professional practice and personal sustainability. This research is therefore hugely significant in illuminating the 'black box' of Balint and will hopefully provide an impetus for a wider range of colleagues to consider participating.
- Successfully extracting oneself from the busyness of school to attend a Balint group meeting surfaces as the most significant factor underpinning group effectiveness and sustainability. Can a shift in tone, from invitation to expectation, be achieved by co-leaders in light of the importance of regular attendance on the developmental nature of the Balint experience?
- What policy levers need to be activated to make the leadership development benefits of Balint explicit, and evolve/devolve the necessary enablers for providing access to Balint for a wider cohort of principals, deputy principals, and other professionals within education?

5.2.4 School Leadership as an Emotional Practice

Main findings

Attacking Isolation: Principal isolation, an inflating administrative workload, and potential consequent burnout are internationally recognised phenomena and research participants repeatedly established linkage with the 'safe space' of their Balint group as sources of connection and reassurance.

Like me – Not like me: The reassuring effect of discovering other principals were navigating similar challenges to one's own, as was discovering differences of experience also emerged from the narrative, perhaps offering otherwise unavailable insights into more challenging contexts than one's own.

Humour as Cathartic and Emerging from a Place of Safety: Evidence also emerged of the relief offered by humour in group discussions, and in particular, the role of dark humour as cathartic. Such sharing of vulnerabilities relating to oneself or one's school will only emerge where group members experience a consistent sense of safety – a particular responsibility of the group leaders.

Processing the Experience of Isolation: Multiple participants describe their sense of isolation using powerful language that reveals psychological pressure. Balint groups provide a space to name, explore, and process this isolation rather than suppressing it. Participants describe experiencing relief through shared recognition and discovering that such isolation isn't a personal failure but inherent structural reality of the role.

Healing through Community: Balint groups function through collective engagement rather than individual treatment, with healing emerging from community rather than intervention. The power lies not in any single element but in the continuous flow between witnessing, recognition, perspective-shifting, connection, and integration.

The Cumulative Benefits of Participation: Participants describe tangible effects on their wellbeing extending beyond immediate case discussions into sustained resilience. The effect appears cumulative rather than episodic. Participants build internal resources over time – libraries of cases to reference, relationships to draw upon, practices to employ.

Discussion point/s, question/s

- The emotional theatre of the school is a phenomenon largely ignored by policymakers, the Inspectorate, patrons, and society at large. Schooling retains many of the factory-model characteristics it emerged from and to serve, and this research 'lifts the bonnet' of the affective dynamics powerfully at work within the lifeworld of the school.
- Real potential exists for these findings to have an impact on the political and policy landscape and language of education by legitimising affective experience, by offering a structure in which such experience can be processed, and by creating upward pressure for 'official' recognition of the centrality of emotion and relationships across the school.
- Subsequent work on these findings could inform policy levers such as 'Looking at our School' , School Self-Evaluation processes, and the range of implementation guidelines emerging each year from the Department of Education and Youth and its agencies.
- The narrative around Balint needs to shift from its role as a medium for self-care to one of community care, and from personal sustainability to professional development. Such a narrative would also support its recognition and adoption at policy level.

5.2.5 Managing group dynamics: Do the dynamics of co-leading a Principals' Balint Group guide and prompt opportunities for transformation?

Main findings

Attending to Group Dynamics and Administration: The co-leaders' attention to the dynamics and the administration of the group produces the structure and culture for a Balint Group discussion. The task of managing a Balint group's dynamics is the most important determinant of effective case discussions through which the presenting principal can take in different perspectives and ideas and distance themselves from the upsetting and personalised aspect of a case.

The Parental Imago of the Co-Leaders: If the qualities of a good co-leadership partnership are in place (e.g., bringing and drawing-out instinctual creative responses; not panicking; displaying parental unity) then the principals will be enabled to more effectively keep terror at bay because of their experience of participating in a group held and contained by such co-leaders.

Prioritising Insight over Solution-Seeking: The role of the Balint Group co-leaders is to facilitate a group discussion in which members gradually learn to tolerate feelings of uncertainty, not knowing, and doubt. This is to counter the habitual nature of professionals whose automatic reaction when presented with a complex dilemma is to find the answer and to know what to do. The Balint Group model assumes such dilemmas are rarely solved this way.

Discovering a New Language: Under the guidance of the co-leaders, the group's 'shared zone of communication' will gradually develop until they are able to converse freely using a new language and a new mood. This largely involves putting into words, imaginings, wondering, visuals and speculations about what was heard in the presentation.

'Feel – Don't Fix!': The leaders' invite members to focus on feelings and to speculate about what is really happening for those involved in the presentation. Given that the normal and habitual nature of principals is to fix and solve, to think rationally and logically, to rely on what was done before (whether it worked or not) and always, always to know what to do, it is reasonable that the co-leaders' job is a deeply complex one.

A Unique Challenge for the Principal Co-Leader: One of the co-leaders is a principal and it is reasonable to assume that the urge to 'fix' is hardwired into them as much as it is hardwired in the members. It takes time, training, support and lots of practice to unravel and loosen this automatic reaction. The pressure to solve aspects of a presentation is always manifest in the group.

Light-Touch, Deft Leadership: Both leaders are in fact managing a difficult tension in the 'feel-don't-fix' dynamic – to facilitate a wide ranging and open discussion but not to smother the mood with instructions that feel counter-productive. This is a complex task. In the midst of a group discussion, there is a constant and sometimes insatiable pressure to solve the issues at the heart of the presentation.

Discussion point/s, question/s

- The term 'dynamic administration' as it applies to the role of the co-leaders is understood across a continuum of meanings, ranging from 'just sending reminder emails and booking a room' to in-depth joint reflection on how individual members are progressing, their feeling states, and follow-up on absences. Such understandings require further insight into their origins and impacts as well as considerations around practice-sharing and professional learning for co-leaders in this area.
- Principals, as CEOs, can consistently deploy language that is transactional, organisationally rooted, and solution focused. They thus require support in accessing a more creative, instinctual, and playful vocabulary and a key role for the co-leaders is to model this. Such a task requires that the co-leaders themselves learn from each other, experiment with their own imaginative terminologies, and occasionally take (fun!) risks in reflecting 'alternative takes on what is really happening here?'
- Both co-leaders sit within contrasting insider-outsider continua; the principal not necessarily familiar with psychodynamic group processes, and the psychotherapist not necessarily grounded in educational leadership. The research uncovers evidence of mutual learning across the two fields but there may equally exist a case for an inductive, light-touch familiarisation for both in terms of the key geographies of their respective roles.
- Balint leaders more widely appear to provide minimal verbal intervention in group discussions and there may well exist a spectrum of 'interventionist' demeanour across the co-leaders in this project. Some may speak little, other more, and others, perhaps too much. The question of 'best practice'

thus arises and the dilemma of whether to contribute actively to the discussion on a particular presentation, remain open.

5.2.6 Co-leaders and the complex task of The Balint Group - the potential for misunderstanding

Main findings

Tentative Learning and Leading: The study provides evidence of emerging leadership skills and a capacity to guide and to lead effective discussions in line with the Balint Group model. The evidence suggests, however, this is an emergent and tentative understanding alongside a slow and gradual adoption of complex leadership skills. The mix of professions as co-leaders is clearly a benefit to the task of leadership but it is not yet clear why.

The Risks of Role Blurring: Whilst the organising of the Balint group is given importance, it is unclear who holds authority for its dynamic administration nor is it clear that both parties understand the emotional role of dynamically administering to the needs of a Balint Group. It is not clear from the data what happens to the leadership relationship or to the group if one of the co-leaders assumes a disproportionate responsibility around some aspect of leading a Balint Group.

Two 'Insider-Outsiders!': All the JMB Principal Balint groups are co-led by a psychotherapist and a school principal. Interdisciplinary leadership of a group brings a host of advantages but also complexity and the potential for misunderstanding. The role of the psychotherapist brings expertise to the emotional and relational undertow in the group. The principal brings a unique perspective to the professional relationships within a school setting, and a deep understanding of the complexities of the school ecosystem – the nature of the interconnected relationship between parent, staff, and students.

Understanding the True Nature of Dynamic Administration: The tasks of managing any reflective practice group for professionals can be thought of in terms of dynamic administration. In theory, the leaders' attention to dynamic administration, securing an accepting environment and attending to norms will promote the professional development of the group members by enhancing their self-awareness, empathy, and understanding of the emotional aspects of professional relationships.

Living with Flux: To facilitate the group's development and all the dynamic reverberations, the leaders must accept that they will often feel lost in the group's process. This is a normal part of the group's maturing towards a capacity to have a richer discussion that is so very different from the kinds of discussions they have in the other parts of their work life. Every Balint group takes time to develop this new language and this new way of thinking – it is important for the members to feel contained and held.

Discussion point/s, question/s

- The need – indeed a call – for structured leadership development is clearly evident from the narrative. This has been a somewhat neglected feature of the JMB project, notwithstanding the shared learnings offered at the annual Community of Practice Day[3]. The emergence of a Balint Society for Ireland will now offer potential for professional learning and sharing opportunities and the present project and its co-leaders should access such training events from the outset.
- An urgency exists around the need to develop and communicate a shared understanding of what is comprehended by the term Dynamic Administration as it applies to Balint leadership. The current

3 This training day is for current and prospective group leaders, both principals and psychotherapists, where the JMB Balint National Leadership Team delivers a reflective skills based approach to the theory and facilitation of Balint Groups for principals.

spectrum of understandings may perhaps be somewhat limiting in certain groups, inhibiting deeper development and group maturation possibilities.

- Specifically, work should be done around attacking the hierarchy of tasks embedded in dynamic administration, with less value placed on transactional work such as emailing and venue-booking, as opposed to the 'higher' tasks around leading psychodynamic processes. Indeed, communication and environment play a central role in arriving at a successful Balint experience, and good practice around the sharing and alternating of all roles and tasks could be developed and disseminated.
- Access to the literature-base around Balint could be afforded to all co-leaders, as well as further developing current platforms such as the twice-yearly JMB Balint Leaders' Newsletter and the set of information notes used in recruitment.
- Though not surfacing as a strong line of commentary, the project's reliance on voluntarism on the part of the principal co-leader alone requires reflection and further investigation. It is generally seen as a pro-bono contribution to peer support but remains both unacknowledged and under-investigated.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 Policy recommendations

Contemporary second-level education in Ireland is being brought through a reform agenda that is both radical and rapid. Comprehensive and accelerated curricular reform at both junior and senior cycle levels brings with it a school-wide change-management responsibility on the part of principals, which is compounded by accumulating policy demand in areas such as mainstreaming of students with complex and profound special educational need, heightened expectations around prevention and reporting of bullying, online threats to student mental health, addressing serious behaviours of concern, and ever-demanding child protection regulations. It is against this backdrop that a reconceptualisation of secondary school principalship is required.

If this research demonstrates anything it is the centrality of affective awareness and deftness on the part of the school leader that will create the backing conditions necessary for deep and meaningful educational change, as opposed to superficial compliance, or worse – the emergence of emotionally sterile schools concerned only with audit and accountability.

Three key policy-level recommendations thus emerge from the findings:

1) There needs to be high-level, articulated acknowledgement of the pivotal roles emotional intelligence, conflict management, and relationship-building play in contemporary school leadership and consequently in the delivery of policy objectives at school level. Such recognition is largely ignored in policy levers such as inspection reports, implementation guidelines, professional codes of practice, or self-evaluation instruments. School climate and culture is, however, becoming more generally acknowledged in Department of Education and Youth outputs and this is to be welcomed but should be expanded to include certain emotional intelligence domains in *'Looking at our School'*, as a first step.

2) Balint is a global movement and is becoming adopted as a highly valuable professional learning and sustainability intervention across an increasingly diverse range of professions. Its 'goodness-of-fit' in terms of enhancing and enriching the practice of school leadership is now unarguable

and further evidence of this is provided in the present study. It is recommended that a Department of Education and Youth level framework for expanding on the JMB project be developed.

3) At time of writing, Ireland is enacting a *Convention on Education and National Conversation*, described by the government as 'a once in a generation opportunity for children, young people, parents, educators and wider society to help shape Ireland's education system for decades to come'. Virtually every policy direction emerging from this conversation will ultimately need to be implemented at school level and will thus need to be led by a principal. Somewhere in that reimagining process, it will be imperative that the emotionally engaged *'leaderliness'* required to deliver on the nation's expectations for the next 50 years will be given equal attention. It is recommended that a parallel or subsequent forum interrogating and problematising principalship is enacted, with its own recommendations explicitly informed by research such as this.

5.3.2 Research Recommendations

Most of the research on the Balint process has been in medical education. This is not surprising as this is where the roots of the process began and is still used to this day. However, the use of the Balint process in educational leadership merits further research. Below we outline some gaps in the current literature that merit attention.

5.3.2.1 Long-term impact on empathy and professional development

Recent meta-analyses (Gong et al., 2024) confirm that Balint groups can improve empathy in the short term, but long-term outcomes remain unclear. There is a need to evaluate the sustainability of empathy gains over time.

5.3.2.2 Mechanisms of learning and change within Balint groups

Although Balint groups from our research appear to support reflective capacity, identity formation, and emotional insight, how these processes unfold is still not well understood. Studies highlight variation in how participants engage with transference, mirroring, emotional and cognitive learning. These mechanisms have not been systematically examined (Bahri et al., 2025; Sivam et al., 2020). Qualitative studies show that participant-presented cases arise from broad contexts, including confusing experiences, value conflicts, and professional identity tensions, but rigorous qualitative work remains limited in medical education (Torppa et al., 2008). It would be very interesting to do a qualitative analysis of the kinds of cases presented in leadership Balint groups. It could highlight the tensions that exist in the Irish context. Further exploration is needed to understand what triggers learning in Balint groups and how participants conceptualise emotionally challenging encounters.

5.3.2.3 Optimal structure, format and engagement

Current evidence shows variation in impact based on number of sessions, facilitation style, and group format. More research is needed to understand what constitutes the optimal number and frequency of sessions and how modified formats (e.g., shorter Balint groups, on-line groups) compare with traditional models (Gong et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025).

5.4 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has explored the key findings of the study and considered their implications for school leadership, policy, and future research. The analysis highlights both the complexity of leaders' work and the potential of reflective practices - such as the Balint model - to support their professional and personal wellbeing. The questions raised here point to important areas for reflection among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners as they navigate the evolving landscape of educational leadership. While the recommendations offered are necessarily tentative, they provide a foundation for further dialogue and inquiry and signal the need for continued attention to the emotional, relational, and structural dimensions of leading in schools.

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7 Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Introduction

The experience and outcomes of participation in a Balint group are under-researched in international literature and the JMB is currently supporting a research project, provisionally entitled *'A Study of Balint Groups for JMB School Principals'.* The research is a qualitative study, carried out over three phases in 2025:

Phase 1. Two focus group interviews with Balint Group Participants

Phase 2. Focus group interview with Balint Group Co-Leaders

Phase 3. Focus groups interviews with Balint Group Participants who left their group.

The research team are as follows:

Majella Dempsey - Majella works in Maynooth University, Department of Education. Majella will be involved in ethical guidance, data anonymization, data storage, data analysis and will work with the team on publications.

Joe Lynch - Joe has worked as a teacher and educational leader for the last 42 years. He is also a qualified individual and group psychoanalytic psychotherapist. Joe has been involved in Balint work for nearly 10 years. He leads an online Balint Group for principals and also co-leads another. He will be involved in research design, data analysis and publications.

Michael Redmond - Michael, a former principal at two Dublin secondary schools, is currently Research and Development Officer with the JMB. His doctoral thesis was on *'Irish Principals' Emotional Competencies and Affectively-Attuned Change-Management'* which subsequently led to his collaboration with Belinda and Joe on the Balint project. He will be involved in research design, data analysis and publications.

Belinda Moller - Belinda is a group analyst working in private practice in Dublin. As part of a former career, Belinda has a doctorate in strategic management. She has been active in supporting the JMB's Balint Groups for principals' project since its start. She is a co-leader of two secondary school principals' Balint groups that have run for over seven years. She will be involved in research design, data analysis and publications.

Purpose of the Study

Objectives:

To evaluate the impact of Balint Group participation on the emotional wellbeing, professional development, and leadership skills of participating school principals

To map the process relating to the principal-psychotherapist co-leadership model

Research Questions:

How does participation in a Balint Group for School Principals impact leadership within a Learning Organisation / second level school?

What are the key dynamics to the principal-psychotherapist co-leadership model as experienced within Balint Groups?

What will the study involve? You are invited to participate in the study as a co-leader or member of a principals' Balint Group within the JMB initiative. Your participation in the research will be by way of participation in a focus group. [We amended this to reflect the phase of research the participant is being invited to take part in]. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form. Please note that the interview/ focus group will not be carried out by any of the four-research team listed above, it will be carried out by two independent researchers. The name and details of the researcher will be shared with you ahead of the interview/ focus group.

Phase 1: If you agree to participate, you will be sent details of the link for the focus group interview session. The session will take approximately 60-90 minutes and will be recorded to allow transcription.

Who has approved this study? This study has received approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee.

Why have you been asked to take part? You are invited to participate in the study as a co-leader or member of a principals' Balint Group within the JMB initiative. Criteria for selection to take part is to ensure a mix of the following:

- Genders representative of the total sample of leaders
- Single sex or co-ed schools
- Mix of urban (Dublin schools)/ rural/ provincial town settings
- School size small (up to 200 students), medium (up to 500 students), large (up to or over 1000)
- DEIS and non-DEIS
- Fee charging and free schools

Please note to aid anonymisation, these details will not be included with your name in the final report. These are required for us to generate our sample.

Do you have to take part? No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the collected data are anonymised and/or aggregated. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with JMB or with Maynooth University.

What information will be collected? Names or organisational positions of participants will remain confidential to the researchers and will not be disclosed in any subsequent analysis or reporting of the research data. Focus Group Interview questions will be shared with you ahead of the event. The questions all focus on your experience of participating in the Balint Group process.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names of participants or the schools in which they work will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at Maynooth University by Majella Dempsey, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by Majella Dempsey.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

What will happen to the information which you give? All data gathered in this research will be kept securely and confidentially in such a way that it will not be possible to identify individual participants. The results of data analysis will be aggregated to identify themes, which will be the basis for a research summary and conclusions. On completion of the research, the collected data, and any data archived for potential use in future research will be fully anonymised.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up and presented as a summary report, will be discussed at internal group meetings, and may be presented at national and international conferences and may be published in international journals. The results will be presented and discussed at seminars and a final report will be presented to the funders and collaborating agencies. The final report will be published on MURAL, Maynooth University Research Archive Library. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? We don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview, a researcher will discuss with you how you found the experience. If you experience any distress following the interview you may contact The National Counselling Service, of which contact details of local offices are available at https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/national-counselling-service/

Any further queries? Thank you for taking the time to read this information document. If you require any clarification, please feel free to contact research.ethics@mu.ie or any of the researchers by email or by phone (details removed for the report) as follows:

Majella Dempsey
Joe Lynch
Michael Redmond
Belinda Moller

This Information Sheet is accompanied by a Consent Form, which you are asked to complete and return as an email attachment. Following receipt of your consent, an overview of the structured interview and a Microsoft Teams link will be sent to you by email.

Appendix B: Consent Form

I _____ agree to participate in research into ***The Impact of Participation in JMB Balint Groups for Principals***

Please tick each statement below

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my focus group interview with (name of interviewer will be added here) to be audio recorded. [will be amended to phase of data collection] ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to the analysis of the data (Date will be added). ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

[*Select as appropriate*]

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

Signed _____ Date _____

Participant Name in block capitals _____

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed _____ Date _____

Researcher Name in block capitals MAJELLA DEMPSEY Contact (Removed for report)

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at dataprotection@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix C: Reconnaissance

General Reflections on Participation in Balint

1. How did you come to join the Balint Group? (motivation)
2. When reflecting on your experience of Balint so far - what are your thoughts, feelings? (general)
3. Again, reflecting on your experience of Balint so far
    a. what has been your experience of the dynamic among the group?
    b. how has it been working together as part of a group?
    c. what have you noticed?
    d. and the effect on collegiality in your own Balint Group (group dynamic)
4. What has supported your continued attendance at Balint? (enablers)
5. Has it been difficult to attend the meetings at times and if so, why? (challenges)
6. What has been your experience regarding the quality of group administration and communication? (structure and organisation)
7. Can you say a little about your experience of the co-leadership model used in Balint? (leadership model)
8. Confidentiality is an essential element of the Balint experience, what has been your experience of this? (confidentiality)

Practice (Impact of Balint Participation on Professional Development - feelings - what has happened for them and to them)

1. Please share some of the key elements of a Balint case (mindful of confidentiality) that have really resonated with you, one that has perhaps stayed with you? (direct experience)
2. Staying with this case, can you identify the impact, if any, this case and the subsequent group discussion had on your thought processes, feelings, or practice? (impact)
3. Reflecting back on the different case presentations and the group discussions that follow - have you noticed it helping you to create a reflective space, before reacting or responding - a mind the gap moment. (giving space)
4. If so, what happens for you in that space?
5. Have you experienced what might be termed 'therapeutic effects' of Balint participation? explanation: some form of healing with self or others, connecting to and understanding an emotional response you may have experienced towards yourself or others? (impact)

Leadership (Linking Balint to Looking at Our School 2022 - 4 domains)

The Looking at Our School 2022 Framework views career-long professional learning as central to both the teachers and leaders work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart. It goes on to outline how important it is 'to provide a structure for peer-reflection within schools, among teachers and leaders'. This reflects the 2016 framework document which emphasised 'structured reflection with others in seeking to enhance teaching and learning and leadership in their school.'

Linked to the above, there are 4 domains as you know, and we will invite you now to reflect on how these domains relate to your Balint experience - so you might keep in mind this link between LAOS and Balint (20 mins)

1. Has your overall leadership practice changed as a result of Balint experience(s), and if so, how? (general effect on leadership practice) (5 mins)

Domain 1 Leading Learning and Teaching (impact of Leading) 5min

1. In the area of *leading teaching and learning* To what extent has your participation in a Balint group had, on (take separately)
    a. promoting a culture of reflection?
    b. collaboration?
    c. Innovation in your leadership practice with teaching and learning and inclusion? (creativity/ innovation)
    d. Domain 3 Leading School Development (impact of Leading) 5min
2. Coming to consider as a Principal your role in *leading school development* and reflecting on your Balint experience - to what extent has participation in Balint allowed you to
    a. create and sustain a positive school culture which is safe and purposeful
    b. promote professional responsibility and accountability
    c. develop effective communication?

Domain 4 Developing Leadership Capacity (impact of Leading) 5min

1. In *developing leadership capacity* to what extent has Balint participation allowed you to critically reflect on your practice in regard to (take separately)
    a. promoting student leadership?
    b. facilitating parent participation?
    c. forging professional networks with other school leaders?(connection)

Domain 2 Managing the Organisation (impact of Managing) 5min

1. Management, as you know, is also part of your roles as Principal, so how has Balint supported this role? (give room for any tensions noted by Principals)

    For example;
    - in fostering a positive and purposeful school culture
    - contributing to effective communication?
    - ensuring professional responsibility, and accountability?

D: Looking Ahead - reflecting back to look ahead

1. Again, reflecting back, how well does the current model of Balint align with your professional needs?
2. How might your experience be improved for future Balint participation? (future impact)
3. Are there any downsides to participation or have you had any negative experiences? (balance in Balint experience)
4. Would you recommend participation to a principal colleague?

Appendix D: Online Focus Group with Balint Co-Leaders

A. Reconnaissance (General Reflections as a co-leader in Balint)

1. Can we start please by telling us how long you have been a co-leader in your Balint for School Principals Group?
2. How did you find yourself in this role as a co-leader of a Principal's Balint Group - why did you decide to say 'Yes'?
3. You may have other experience of leading Balint with other groups, so what has been your distinct general experience of **co-leading** a Balint group for Principals?
   Challenges
   Joys
   Concerns
4. What have you noticed about yourself and your own personal style as a co-leader of a Balint Group? (rather than a leader in other areas)
5. Part of the task in Balint is to offer a **safe, open, and exploratory space** (e.g. insuring that the group discussions are of an imaginative and wondering/wandering nature, rather than concrete, logical and factual) - as a co-leader how have you gone about creating this type of space to ensure this task actually happens?
6. And thinking again about that task of a Balint group, is there anything you have noticed *in particular* about co-leading a Balint group for Principals who are obviously working in an educational/secondary school context?
7. As a Balint co-leader, how do you keep the focus in the group discussion on exploring the relationship between the presenter of a case and the subject of the case, rather than the group offering advice giving or 'fixing'? (was already addressed earlier, so not asked directly}

B. Practice (impact of Co-leading - feelings - what has happened for you and to you?)

1. Is there anything specific you would like to reflect on around the actual experience of co-leadership?

   co-leading with someone from a different profession? (follow the possible challenge here - are there tensions in this co-leadership model?)
2. Does it have a value for you?
3. Firstly, with Principals- 'Has your experience of co-leading a

   Principals' Balint Group impacted on how you perceive your own role or work

   as a Principal? (or if no longer a Principal how you view the role)

And what about the two therapists?

4. Both disciplines - therapy and education - have their own language, for example, therapists may talk about the 'unconscious, holding or containing the group'…and perhaps Principals may talk about 'AP1s, the SMT, SEN' etc - so what has that been like, becoming familiar with the different languages, so to speak, in each discipline?
5. Keeping past cases in mind and your role as co -leader in Balint, what have been the challenges for you as a co-leader in keeping the group on the task, what I mean is the task of Balint which we mentioned above - staying with the emotions, imagination, creativity rather than the logical, factual, solutions?

And how have you responded to these challenges?

6. I am wondering if when you hear a case and found yourself having a

   personal/emotional response that might be linked to your own personal experience, what has that been like to hear this as a co-leader rather than as a participant? (how do you respond)
7. Let's now talk for a little while about the Balint Principal groups you co-lead in terms of group dynamics
   - What have you generally observed about the group dynamic in your Balint group?
     - *Have you noticed any emerging or recurring themes, emotions, or patterns in how the group functions?*
     - *Have there been moments in the group where either issues arising in cases or the process of the group dynamics itself felt challenging to address?*
     - *Have you noticed moments when members of the group are either dependent on the group or on you as co-leaders?*
     - *Is there anything else you think that the group struggles with in being of part of a Balint Group*
     - *How possibly, can co-leadership help with this struggle?*

C. Looking Ahead - reflecting back to look ahead

1. Wondering about the actual practicalities of running a Balint Group for Principals (what some of you have called 'housekeeping') e.g. membership/ setting up the group - making phone calls, sending emails, follow up contact with participants, arranging the venue etc - how has that functioned? Who does what as it were?
2. What has supported you to date to be a co-leader in Balint for Principals?
3. What might support your continued CPD as a Balint co–leader?
4. If you, as a current or former Principal were to encourage other Principals to become co-leaders what might you say by way of encouragement? and the therapists?

Appendix E: Focus Group with Non-Participants

Reflections on Participation/Non-Participation in Balint (N=3)

A. Setting the scene: Welcome & Outlining purpose of the FG

-Reminder of confidentiality and securely recorded

-Reminder that all identifiable info and names will be anonymised

-check for consent forms

-Reminder we will finish on time and thus we may politely cut your response.

B. Experience of joining Balint

1. Can you recall how you came to hear about the Balint Group? (motivation)
2. What was your experience regarding (of) the initial invite to join a Balint Group (and joining)? (structure and organisation)
3. Can you remember how many sessions you attended? (were these sequential or with large gaps?)
4. Maybe you could tell us a little of that experience, for example, the first meeting, how many were present, what was your initial reaction to the group? Is there anything you remember in particular? (or that stands out) (emotions)

C. Reflecting back - Experience:

5. Thinking back over your experience of Balint (no matter how long) what now are your general thoughts, feelings? (general)
    a. With regard to the dynamic of the group?
    b. Did you experience any sense of collegiality in the group (group dynamic)
    c. Or perhaps some other feelings including negative? (emotions)

D. Knowing & Understanding Balint:

6. Can you make a connection to how Balint could support your professional needs as a principal? Do you consider Balint to have any value to your role as a principal?

7. Would you recommend Balint participation to a principal colleague? Why/Why not?

E. Leaving Balint:

8. Maybe we can now talk about leaving Balint - Can you remember why you decided to leave the Balint group? What might be some of the reasons?

    a. Was it difficult to attend the meetings and if so, why? (challenges)

    b. Do you think there was anything that could have supported your continuation in the group a little more? Perhaps timing of meetings, costs, support, other? (supports/dynamic admin)

c. Endings can always be useful in groups if they are marked and I am wondering if that was your experience, how did you leave? What was the ending like for you?

d. Would you change anything about the end?(dynamic admin/roles)

F. F. Conclusion/Future thinking:

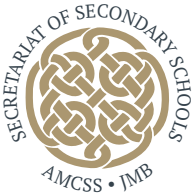
9. If given the opportunity to join a Balint group again Is there any change needed which would encourage you to give Balint another go?

10. And finally, anything else you would like to add that we didn't address?

Thank you etc.

Notes

Notes



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