

Supervision: Now or Never

Reclaiming Reflective Supervision in Social Work

Although much has been written in the past year about problems with social work practice, there is one area where social work has been streets ahead of many of the other professions involved in protecting children and vulnerable adults. That area is staff supervision. However despite this longstanding commitment, the fortunes of social work supervision have been mixed. In its final report the Social Work Task Force recognised that supervision is 'an integral element of social work practice not an add-on' and recommended the establishment of national standards for employers including 'requirements governing supervision'⁽¹⁾. With the spotlight on the profession, we have an unrivalled opportunity to reclaim effective and reflective social work supervision.

This article outlines what we need to do if the profession is to finally realise its much vaunted, but too often unrealised, ambition of ensuring high quality supervision for all social workers. It draws upon the authors' extensive involvement in writing about supervision and training supervisors over the past two decades. They have recently written the first national guides to the supervision of social workers during their early years of qualified practice⁽²⁾⁽³⁾, following which, they wrote and co-directed the national training programme for supervisors working in children's social care.

The importance of supervision

Supervision has been integral to the development of the social work profession from its outset⁽⁴⁾ representing its core commitment to reflective practices, and accountable decision making. In 1996 the Association of Directors of Social Services identified supervision as one of the five elements of good practice⁽⁵⁾. In 2007 'Providing Effective Supervision' provided the first national policy statement on the need for organisations in England to have a robust arrangement for supervision⁽⁶⁾. In 2008 an analysis of serious case reviews noted the fundamental importance of supervision to critical thinking.⁽⁷⁾

In 2009 Lord Laming underscored the contribution of good supervision to practice commenting:

It is vitally important that social work is carried out in a supportive learning environment that actively encourages the continuous development of professional judgement and skills. Regular, high quality, organised supervision is critical.⁽⁸⁾

Social work supervision – current challenges

Whilst much good supervision undoubtedly goes on, experience both in this country⁽⁹⁾ and overseas⁽¹⁰⁾ paints a picture of inconsistencies, interruptions, and the increasing dominance of managerial and performance agendas to the detriment of reflection, critical analysis, and emotional support for the worker. In a 2008 Unison survey⁽¹¹⁾ a quarter of participants reported that supervision had deteriorated over the previous five years. Unpublished research by Community Care in the same year⁽¹¹⁾ 28% respondents reported receiving no supervision at all, and a further 31% that the supervision was inadequate for their caseload. In 2009 Lord Laming⁽⁸⁾ summarised the position as follows:

There is concern that the tradition of deliberate, reflective social work practice is being put in danger because of an overemphasis on process and targets, resulting in a loss of confidence amongst social workers. Regular, high quality, organised supervision is critical, as are routine opportunities for peer learning and discussion. Currently not enough time is dedicated to this and individuals are carrying too much personal responsibility with no outlet for the sometimes severe emotional and psychological stresses that staff involved in child protection often face. (p32)

In sum the consequences of absent, inadequate, or negative forms of supervision constitute a major threat to workforce stability, capacity, confidence, competence and morale. No attempt to revitalise the social care profession can succeed unless it is underpinned by high quality standards for, and practice in supervision.

What's the problem with supervision?

1. Problems with supervision have complex and multi-layered origins, which can only be touched at in this article.
2. Until recently there has been a lack of consistent political, professional, and organisational leadership in championing the role of supervision in social work. This has been complicated by the integration of education and children's social care, as education has no similar tradition.
3. The lack of a clear theoretical model about the nature, influence, and critical elements of effective supervision undermines the ability to drive up standards, training, support, and monitoring of supervisory practice. Too often we settle for 'having supervision' rather than having good supervision – a crucial difference.
4. Until the publication in 2007 of 'Providing Effective Supervision' ⁽⁶⁾ there had been no national statement addressing the need for social care organisations to have a robust policy framework for supervision. Given the past decade has seen regulation invading almost every aspect of front line practice, it is perverse that so little has been done to quality assure an activity that arguably has the greatest influence on practice other than the practitioner herself.
5. Finally the quality of supervisor selection, induction, training, support, and review has been so inconsistent. Too many first line managers report that their selection to this vital post involved no discussion or testing of their supervisory commitment, knowledge or skill.

The critical ingredients for effective supervision

There could not be a more crucial time to establish clearly what effective supervision looks like. Organisations must make sure that expectations are clear, that supervisors are selected, trained and supported to deliver against those expectations and that quality assurance systems include a focus on remedial action when it is clear that supervision is not being delivered to the required standard.

Not a performance audit

First however it is important to be clear about what supervision is not. Supervision is not practice audit. The focus on performance management has come to dominate the process. Supervisors report that they are expected to use supervision to audit adherence to processes leaving little time to explore the quality of assessment decision making and intervention. Workers frequently report that supervision takes place in front of a computer where the priority becomes compliance checking rather than exploration of practice. Practice audit must be separated out from supervision and the prime focus of supervision must be exploration and critical analysis of practice.

What works in supervision?

Research into “what works” consistently points to the need for relationship based practice built on a sound understanding of the service user's perspective, history and current circumstances. ⁽¹²⁾ The limited research that exists into the impact of supervision on outcomes for service users ⁽¹³⁾ indicates that supervision also needs to be grounded within a secure professional relationship where the supervisor takes time to understand and assess the supervisee's strengths and weaknesses. Professional practice, and worker/service user dynamics need to be critically analysed, and the impact of the worker's emotions on thoughts and actions is explored. This is the basis by which reflective but authoritative social work/care practice is developed. Drawing on research and experience of working with supervisors, the Supervision-Outcomes chain describes the way in which supervision influences practice.

The foundation for the supervision's influence on practice and outcomes lies in ensuring that the worker is clear about their purpose role and responsibility. However workers can be clear about their role, yet feel unconfident, conflicted or anxious in discharging it. This is where the supervisor's practical and emotional intelligence are crucial in picking up such clues and in building the practitioner's confidence. The nature and focus and of the supervisory partnership will be determined by the supervisor's assessment of the worker, and therefore

how much direction or conversely, discretion is appropriate. This lays the platform for effective supervisory planning designed to develop the practitioner's knowledge, skills and confidence. Finally the supervisor herself needs to be active in developing the worker's practice skills either through co-working a case or providing observation and feedback of the worker or through setting up other coaching, co-working, or observational opportunities. Interestingly it is worth noting that these seven elements are equally relevant in the practitioner's relationship with the service user.

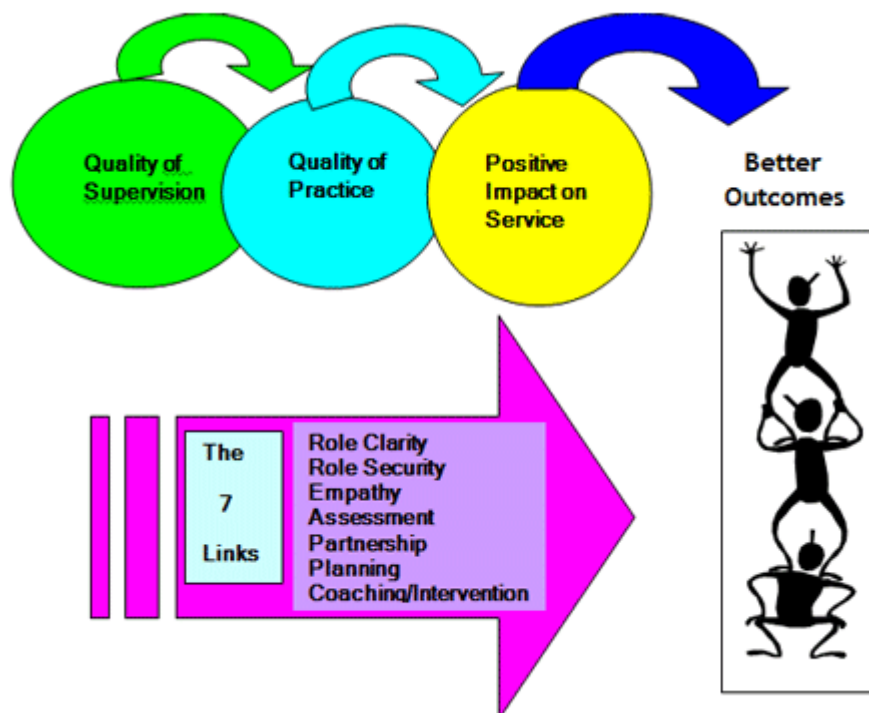


Fig 1 The Supervision-Outcome Chain ⁽¹⁴⁾

An integrated model

Supervision is a complex activity and there is a need for an integrated model. Traditionally supervision policies refer to a three or four function model of supervision including management, professional development, emotional support and (sometimes) mediation. This task-focused approach fails to take account of the interaction between these functions, or identify the role of the supervisor in facilitating critical analysis of practice. It also frequently fails to situate the dynamics of the supervisory process within the wider organisational or inter-agency context.

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The integrated 4x4x4 model ⁽¹⁴⁾ provides a coherent, practical, and well-tested framework to integrate these different but connected elements of supervision. It comprises:

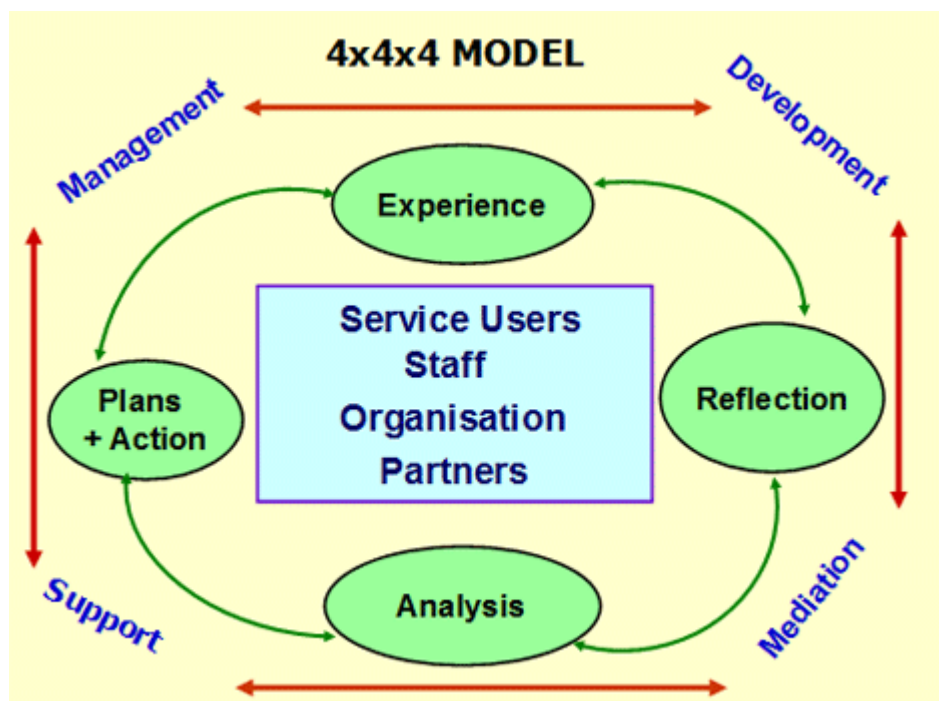


Fig 2 The 4x4x4 Integrated Model of Supervision ⁽¹⁴⁾

This model integrates the four functions of supervision, with the reflective supervision cycle and focuses on the needs and priorities of the four stakeholders. At the heart of this model is the principle, demonstrated by the Supervision-Outcome chain (Fig 1) **that supervision is part of the intervention with service users.**

A specialist version of this model for supervising assessment practice was developed as part of the national guide for supervisors of newly qualified social workers (2). However as this was focused on children's social work practice, there is a need to establish a common core model for effective supervision of assessment practice across children's and adult social care work.

Where now for supervision?

Although there are some encouraging current developments (1), if the establishment of common standards for the supervision of social work is to be effective it must:

- Build on the current knowledge of what works in relation to effective supervision
- Integrate into one coherent framework the various initiatives that are currently taking place in relation to improving supervision standards
- Be linked to a competence framework, training and accreditation of supervisors
- Include a focus on the roles, responsibilities and preparation of supervisees so as to clarify and support their contribution to making supervision effective
- Take account of the various settings within which social workers are employed and address the issue of workers within integrated teams where line management and professional supervision may be separated
- Be embedded in an audit and quality assurance frameworks which measure the quality, and not just the occurrence of supervision. Feedback from supervisees should be the norm, alongside evaluation of the way in which supervision is making a real difference to practice.

In conclusion, we now need to fully grasp the opportunity offered by the national reform programme for social work to firmly establish the right of all social workers to regular supervision of a type and quality that will really make a difference to the lives of the children and adults receiving social work services. It is imperative that there is a nationally coordinated approach that draws on best practice and sets high expectations. This needs to be coupled with effective evaluation methods to ensure that standards are maintained. A focus on supervision should be an early agenda item for the National College of Social Work in their role of agreeing and articulating high standards for the profession.

Authors

Tony Morrison & Jane Wonnacott

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