Supervision in Schools Pilot – Concluding Summary

Introduction

Over the academic year 2016-2017 a pilot trying out supervision in schools has run in 5 schools in Dorset/Poole. This came about because of the interest coming from schools about supervision. Having delivered training on the 4x4x4 integrated model of supervision widely used in health and social care settings Penny Sturt, an In-Trac Associate, wanted to see what adaptations were needed if the model was to become a useful one in school settings.

The pilot has involved a secondary school covering Years 7-13, one special school covering Reception to Year 11, a first school covering Reception to Year 4, 2 primary schools covering Reception to Year 6, one of which was two separate schools; infant and junior. This provided a unique opportunity to find out how the model could be adapted to each setting.

What the pilot offered

The pilot offered to work with participating schools to find effective methods of establishing supervision into school settings. The impetus for this pilot came from those working in the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) role who felt challenged by cuts to other provision, aware of children with unmet needs in school and the associated emotional burden on staff.

1. Schools participating in this project received support from an identified consultant who worked with them in developing an approach to supervision in line both with national expectations and established good safeguarding practice. This allowed schools to tailor their supervisory systems to meet their individual needs. The consultant worked with the school through on site meetings.

2. The consultant offered meetings with other schools participating in the process and this enabled individual schools to join a community of practice, learning from others and together working towards finding solutions to any challenges arising.

3. To establish an evidence base of what is effective within a school environment an Educational Psychologist was involved as researcher collating, devising and administering questionnaires at the beginning and end of the pilot.

   A representative from each school (usually the DSL) was expected to attend the meetings highlighted above and offer supervision on a regular basis to staff within school. Training and guidance was offered prior to enrolment in the pilot.

Thematic summary

From these meetings and feedback into the group a termly summary was produced which highlighted some regularly occurring themes. These are summarised below as a series of discussion points.

The **context** in which schools are working is changing as the impact of cuts is felt. Schools now are finding themselves as one of the few universal services remaining and that much of the previous support, that facilitated children accessing education, has been cut or reduced, e.g. educational psychology, social care, children's centres, speech and language therapy, CAMHS, etc. This is resulting in little support for children with additional needs unless they clearly hit the child protection threshold. The effects of this are without support these children are having difficulty accessing education and staff, who are either providing support to or trying to teach these children, are reporting feeling emotionally drained.

Allied to the changes around the infrastructure in which schools operate are the changes to the education system and the renewed emphasis on educational attainment over other aspects of children's lives and this being reflected in how schools are organised and governed. Because of their role, as members of the senior management team responsible for safeguarding, the DSLs are acutely caught up in the tension between safeguarding vulnerable children and promoting educational attainment. Each DSL was aware that this was an area of increasing pressure for them in terms of how they became accountable to the leadership team/governing body. It is an ongoing area of interest from the pilot about how staff are facilitated to work most effectively in managing these tensions so that children, especially those with additional needs, can be supported in maintaining their educational opportunities.

It is also a tension that has been highlighted in the work of Rebecca Brown and her colleagues at Loughborough University who have followed a cohort of high risk children identified pre-birth up to the age of 8. The latest report, summarising the findings of the children aged 8, can be accessed here (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5343 76/Eight-year-olds_identified_in_infancy_as_at_risk_of_harm.pdf). They distinguish between schools that focus on educational attainment and those which have a greater "family and welfare" focus. This pilot would seem to reflect the wider discussion about how are the multiple needs of children addressed within education and what additional support facilitates their participation? The question which is relevant to the pilot is whether emotional support of staff (through supervision) facilitates children in accessing education? This will be discussed further.

Time is a big issue in schools and how it is prioritised. The DSL role tends to be a reactive role and one of the questions the DSLs asked was what would change by having more regular meetings (supervision) with staff? The DSLs have arranged to meet key staff regularly and shared an expectation that staff plan and prepare for supervision. In one school the headteacher sent: *"Emails to identify areas to discuss so are prepared and therefore time usefully spent…..Knew case and had already reflected on it. So agenda known in advance."*

The desired outcome is that this will build staff awareness and flexibility of response to lessen the opportunities for crises occurring. The consensus throughout was that they were building a culture about reflecting and thinking about what is happening rather than only reacting to what is or has happened; for example, the DSLs reported giving themselves permission to take space to think in, as they needed to prepare for supervision with staff too. By doing this, probable consequences of the decisions or plans made, can be thought through in advance. The working hypothesis for the pilot was that planned meetings (supervision) might mean more effective management and support of the more vulnerable or at risk children by offering emotional support to staff working with them.

Each school, despite the challenges of context and time, made a commitment to **change**. At each school the DSL with their selected staff was pro-active. Each DSL decided to whom they offered supervision either individually or in groups. Gradually the expectations have become clearer about what could and should be discussed. There have been fruitful discussions within the schools and amongst the combined group thinking about who on the staff team needs to know what information to effectively safeguard children including sharing computer systems which facilitated this.

Another theme has been **emotional support**. There have been 3 distinct areas, one the benefit to staff in school having their emotional needs recognised. Secondly, an awareness that the pilot has legitimised a need for emotional support in the role of DSL and how to sustain that support after the pilot and thirdly, the impact of being the worker at the boundary between the school and social care resulting in knowing more about what children's lives are like outside school.

One DSL stated that: *"Emotionally it is an exhausting and exhilarating job in equal measure. There are a huge range of emotions that are experienced on a daily basis. By being able to begin to order and work through these emotions through supervision has benefitted my practice."*

In offering supervision to staff they have been given space to feel. This has been welcomed and has assisted with managing the emotionally demanding aspects of both the teaching role as well as the safeguarding elements within schools. Especially dealing with and responding to those children who need to be safeguarded before they are ready to learn and whose behaviour can interfere with other children's learning. As this is a summary nothing will be included that identifies schools or staff members. However, the feedback includes a recognition that offering staff regular supervision gives them a space to offload and prevents sickness, it also offers the chance to take notice of how staff are feeling about children and ask questions about why, it helps staff to recognise when they need to take steps to look after themselves including when to seek support from colleagues, whether that is within the school or outside it. One teacher stated that supervision*: "builds resilience and energy to cope."*

All 5 DSL supervisors rated 'having resilience- the ability to keep going under stress' as very important.

Participants feel this pilot has legitimised a need for emotional support in the DSL role. This has given rise to questions about what to do if there is limited emotional support available within the school for the DSL or within the existing networks and how will this be provided after the pilot? In some schools being part of a bigger trust is offering opportunities for support across networks of schools and in some Governors are available who are highly skilled. However, this is dependent on having the "right" people rather than roles and expectations of practice within schools.

DSLs have also highlighted the emotional impact of being the school representative at social care meetings and being privy to information about children which can be highly distressing. They also must manage the consequences of social care decision making e.g. when children move placements, necessitating a change of school and helping the children in those transitions. This is a significant part of the role of DSL, this term we have considered the emotional consequences for staff. Last term the discussion focused more on where the information was shared and with whom, to make the experience better for the child within school. Not all schools are equally affected and in some attendance at such meetings is rare, in others it occurs regularly. Finding strategies to manage these demands will need to be determined in each school. There are emotional consequences and finding satisfactory solutions when these situations feel overwhelming has kept emerging as a discussion point.

Learning from the pilot
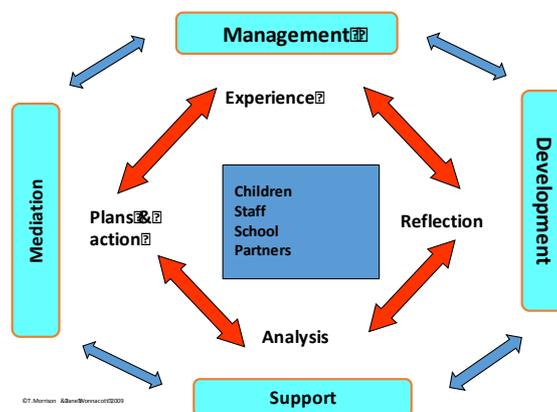
4x4x4 Integrated model of supervision

This is the model which has been used in this pilot. In discussing what has been learnt it is useful to have the model as a guide to how it has been implemented as each school has done it slightly differently; the key message is the model is sufficiently flexible to be adapted for use in the range of schools participating in this pilot.

The functions (purpose – why do it?) of supervision are around the outside of the model, the people who benefit from supervision are at the core of the model and the method of how is it done, is represented by the learning cycle combining seeing (experience), feeling (reflection), thinking (analysis) as well as actions.

The major concern about whether there was sufficient time to implement supervision was overcome by making a commitment to timetabling supervision into the school timetable at the beginning of the academic year. Supervision was timetabled in and staff were expected to adhere to it which meant they turned up ready to use the time. Once staff understood the function of supervision they made it a priority and used it well.

All schools stressed the importance of external consultancy in explaining and implementing the model in schools and providing a role model of how to supervise.

One headteacher stated: *"It seemed the use of someone external to your organisation had a more open view."*

Another DSL commented that: *"The external support was probably more beneficial than anticipated."*

Staff reported they felt cared for by having supervision (emotional support). One headteacher commented: *"It is at times a very isolated role and supervision has helped me to feel supported."*

One Deputy DSL said: *"You can discuss issues and not feel that you are alone."*

They felt and their managers agreed that their knowledge and skills had increased (development/ management functions). All of the DSL supervisors and all of the staff that they supervised felt that their own knowledge and skills had developed as a result of supervision.

This has developed their confidence in their roles (management). One DDSL stated: "Supervision has given me confidence in my ability to make judgements and decisions."

And increased awareness about the relationship between schools and other agencies (mediation function). For example, one class teacher commented: *"I have developed knowledge of different services."*

Because supervision was a planned activity both parties, supervisor and supervisee, made sure they prepared for the meetings, it allowed for a shared agenda and prior thinking about what they wanted to achieve which made the meetings purposeful.

In reviewing why the pilot had worked as well as it did it was acknowledged that there had been commitment from the Senior Leadership Team, the staff offered supervision had made a commitment to it and prioritised time for it, this included preparation and understanding the aims of supervision.

In one school the headteacher set up a system of: *"Identifying diary time in advance and keeping it sacred."*

As a result of receiving supervision staff reported they understood their roles in safeguarding children better, they had an improved awareness of school policies and practices and improved relationships within the school with other staff. They reported that there had been a change in how they recorded and shared information. One headteacher identified that from a greater understanding and: *"knowledge about how Social Care worked our procedures and practices for safeguarding have developed."*

Supervisors had noted this too, that staff shared their concerns about children earlier. For example, in one school *"Regularly checking with staff to ensure the opportunity was given for them to be able to express concerns before they got too big."* Supervision gave them an opportunity to have regular updates about what had happened to information they had shared previously and likely consequences, for example the Social Care thresholds were better understood. By offering emotional care and support it was possible to identify opportunities for professional development and empower staff in cascading training to others for example, e.g. recognising neglect.

There was a noticeable increase in reporting low level concerns. Information gathering improved and staff ability to think, to analyse information and to problem solve improved too. One DSL noticed*: "Identifying areas of concern and allowing staff to begin to solve cases and problems for themselves"* increased during the pilot. There was an increased awareness of safeguarding which increased staff confidence about their roles with each other, with other professionals and with children and parents (the people/ stakeholders who benefit from supervision). Supervision provided a space to challenge assumptions and to think through what the next steps could /should be.

Analysis of the pre and post pilot questionnaires indicates consistent improvement in staff confidence in their ability to safeguard the needs of young people in their care. Using a rating scale, for the supervisors:
- 2 supervisors gave the same rating of confidence, pre and post pilot
- 2 supervisors increased the rating of their confidence by one
- 1 supervisor increased the rating of their confidence by 4!

Additionally, for the supervisees, using the same rating scale:
- 1 supervisees gave the same rating of confidence, pre and post pilot
- 2 supervisees increased the rating of their confidence by 1
- 1 supervisee increased the rating of their confidence by 2
- 1 supervisee decreased the rating of their confidence by 1.

Conclusions

To facilitate supervision in schools it is helpful to have an external consultant to explain and develop the model and as a role model in offering supervision.

The model works well in schools once the purpose of each element is understood and used. It is flexible enough to be adapted to the variety of purpose. For example, in the pilot some used supervision as a group intervention working with class teams, some used it individually supporting the pastoral leaders, others used it to develop a safeguarding team. It would appear from this that the model worked well whether used individually or in groups but it was a small project to draw definitive conclusions. What seem to be important are adding 4 further elements to the model: having a supervision *policy*, using working *agreements*, how supervision sessions are *recorded* and formalised *reviews*. Having a policy and agreement further distinguishes the boundary between performance management and supervision. There are many performance management expectations in schools (e.g. learning walks/ termly reviews), so it is important that supervisors hold in mind the need for emotional support alongside managerial expectations during supervision. Perhaps it reflects the tensions in schools about meeting the needs of children to feel safe in order to learn when the focus of schools is expected to be educational attainment. Providing emotional containment to staff helps them be emotionally available to children who need that prior to being ready to learn.

The remit of this pilot was to ask staff and so the feedback relates to staff outcomes. It would seem logical that children benefitted from the changes in staff reported here but that would be an anecdotal observation. One DSL commented that:
"I believe that supervision enabled better understanding and consideration of home circumstances, previous history, and current obstacles to parenting. This enabled staff to offer better support for pupils from a more informed position."

There are many positives that have emerged from the pilot. Staff are clearer about their roles. Staff feel better supported to cope with the emotional demands of their work. Staff can develop their own initiatives particularly in managing and responding to safeguarding in the absence of the DSLs. Staff are developing their own capacity to being open to challenge, increasingly confident in challenging others and in their general career progression. One question on the post-supervision questionnaire asks about the impact that being a teacher has on you emotionally. One headteacher stated: *"Supervision gives you the time, space and permission to acknowledge and explore, to ensure we are giving children our best in terms of safeguarding."*

The pilot has provided examples of how the existing 4x4x4 model of supervision can work in schools and the importance of building the underpinning culture of policy, agreement, record keeping and review. It has shown that provided the elements are understood by all parties in school it can be used flexibly and that staff value the opportunity to offload as well as develop their problem solving and analytical skills. One teacher when asked on the post-supervision questionnaire if their best hopes about receiving supervision had been met, replied: *"I was not really aware prior to the project of what this might be, but feel that it (supervision) has been really beneficial and supportive."*

The unanswered questions relate to who supervises the supervisor if there are no peer networks available locally? What reinforcement is required to maintain good practice in supervision in schools?

In addition, one headteacher commented that: *"There is a need for greater understanding amongst all Senior Leadership Team (in schools) of the importance of the supervision process."*

Penny Sturt

Jo Rowe

In-Trac Associate

Researcher

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