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Authors	Jenkinson, Hilary
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The importance and benefits of supervision in youth work practice

Abstract

This article explores the concept of supervision and its implementation within a youth work context. The paper describes and explores a process of staff development facilitated by the author which involved providing supervision training to a group of youth work practitioners at Cork YMCA in Ireland and continuing to meet them on a monthly basis over a period of a year in a mentoring capacity. These sessions provided a supportive space for supervisors and aimed to facilitate a reflective process in relation to their own supervisory practice. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges of the supervision process, advocates the importance of supervision in ensuring effective youth work practice and identifies the beneficial impact of this at a number of levels.

Key words: Youth work, supervision, youth workers

Introduction

Supervision has become an established, accepted aspect of many helping professions such as counselling and social work. However, despite Marken and Payne's assertion that in youth work, supervision is 'a fundamental practice need for all workers at all levels' (1987,p. 20), this is far from the experience of many youth work practitioners. This paper explores the definition and functions of supervision within a youth work context and then outlines the experience of one organisation's attempt to establish supervision policy and practice through a programme of training and mentoring supervisors. As part of this process, the author reviewed the staff development

initiative by gaining structured written feedback from participants regarding their experiences of supervision and the impact they felt it had at a number of levels in the agency. This paper draws from the participants' experiences in relation to the benefits and challenges of supervision, specifically highlighting the impact of supervision on supervisees, supervisors, the organisation and service users.

Supervision – a definition

Supervision, as defined in the context of youth work practice, refers to a worker meeting with a supervisor on a regular basis in order to talk through issues arising for them in the course of their work. It provides space for the worker to step back from the coal-face of the work, to reflect on their practice, and to develop strategies in relation to future practice. The general goal of supervision is "that one person, the supervisor, meets with another, the supervisee, in an effort to make the latter more effective in helping people" (Hess 1980,p. 5 in Hawkins and Shohet 2000,p 50). This definition refers to individual managerial supervision. Within youth work practice, other types of supervision also occur. Supervision can be carried out in a group context where the supervisor meets a number of workers at the same time. Peer supervision refers to when a group of workers meet and process their work in a context of mutual support where no one person has the role of supervisor. Supervision can also take the form of non-managerial supervision in which case the supervisor is usually external to the agency. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on individual managerial supervision.

The prevalence of supervision within youth work

The degree to which youth work organisations implement a formal system of supervision varies widely. It is the experience of many workers that supervision is placed way down the list of organisational priorities; often only being seen necessary if there is a problem. Most authors acknowledge that the practice of supervision is not widespread within youth work. Writing in 1964, Joan Tash stated that supervision was a rare possibility for youth workers; in 1987 Christian and Kitto echo this sentiment asserting that while youth work as a profession subscribes to the principle of supervision, supervision practice is not well established (1987,p. 1). In a review of Ofsted reports (1998-2000) carried out by the National Youth Agency (NYA) in the UK, it was found that less than a quarter of services examined had satisfactory supervision practices. In 2009, in relation to supervision, Ofsted report 'Too often, however, individual support sessions were sacrificed because of other perceived priorities or they failed to be a sufficiently challenging professional dialogue about improving practice and achievement' (2009,p. 23). Sapin's recent observation that 'Many youth workers are unsupervised or experience poor supervision' (2009,p. 190) doesn't paint an encouraging picture either.

This is in sharp contrast with other helping professions e.g. counselling, where regular supervision is not only seen as necessary but as an ethical requirement of practice (McKay, 1987). While youth work as a profession is renowned for its focus on the needs of young people, far too often the needs of the staff who work with them can be largely over-looked.

The need for supervision in youth work

Youth work by its nature is a stressful occupation, often characterised by long hours, a hectic schedule, working with young people facing difficult situations, and a scarcity

of resources. Youth workers are all too familiar with working under pressure trying to deal with numerous situations requiring their attention. The role is varied and can involve responding to the needs of young people, the requirements of funding bodies, relationships with colleagues and management, and the ever-increasing demands of administrative work. As with other helping professions, the youth worker's main tool is his or herself and so workers spend a lot of time giving of themselves as they seek to engage with, motivate, care for and empower the young people they work with and attend to other aspects of the job as well. This level of personal output on the part of youth workers is only sustainable in the long term, if they themselves are in turn being supported and resourced in the work. Biggs observes that the impact of working with teenagers who are troubled makes for extremely difficult and demanding work experiences and asserts that it is crucial that 'staff need to be given the space to think about the anxieties stirred up by the work and the effect of these anxieties on them' (Mawson, 1994,p. 73 cited in Briggs, 2002,p. 92). In highlighting the need for supervision, McNamara et al (2008) point to the high levels of burnout within youth work and assert that supervision has mitigating effects on the stress of youth work practice. Supervision is a key context in which the worker can be supported providing them with a safe place in which to explore and work through issues that come up for them during the course of their work. Doug Nicholls, General Secretary of the Community and Youth Workers' Union in the UK identifies supervision as being 'the single most important factor in improving youth work employment practice and policy' (1995,p. 55).

The nature of supervision

Marken and Payne (1987) assert that one of the reasons supervision is not well established in youth work practice is both a lack of understanding and in some cases misunderstanding of what it actually entails. To engage in something which is understood in vague terms can be met with lack of motivation and anxiety on the part of both workers and supervisors.

In the author's experience of providing training for youth work organisations in supervision, often participants will say that the most helpful aspect of the training is examining the nature and content of supervision. For the participants in the supervision and mentoring project at Cork YMCA, this was one of the most valuable aspects of their initial training. Gaining a clear understanding of the elements of supervision provided a framework on which to base their practice, and also a basis for the evaluation of the supervision process.

Let us examine four main functions of supervision adapted from the ideas of both Kadushin (1976) and Morrison (2001). Diagram 1 outlines these functions.

Insert Diagram 1

Supervision is commonly identified with the supportive function where the aim of the process is to provide a safe space, to listen and support the worker in relation to their work. It involves helping the worker process how the work they are engaged in is affecting them and helping them articulate and work through any difficulties they are experiencing. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the worker's achievements and celebrate their successes. Another aspect of this function is to help the worker to develop strategies in relation to the areas addressed in supervision.

Where the supervision is carried out by a line manager, there is a clear managerial aspect to the process which involves monitoring the workload and tasks carried out by the worker. In this regard the supervisor exercises their responsibility in

ensuring that the work of the supervisee is being carried out in accordance with ethical, legal, and organisational requirements. It also involves ensuring the worker is clear about their role and responsibilities and that they are adequately resourced to achieve what is required of them. At times this facet of supervision will require the supervisor to introduce an element of challenge into the process, if, for example the supervisor identifies aspects of the worker's practice which is unhelpful, unethical or contrary to agency policy.

Many authors acknowledge the tensions which can exist between the supportive and managerial functions of supervision (Hawkins & Shohet 2000; Richmond 2009; McNamara et al 2008; Arnold et al 1981; Tash 1964). In this regard Arnold et al (1981) make the point that it is difficult to be honest about your weaknesses, failings, and feelings of inadequacy with someone who has the power to renew your contract (or not). Fineman (1985) reinforces this assertion from the point of view of a supervisee;

> 'I have regular meetings with my supervisor, but always steer clear of my problems in coping with my report work. Can I trust her? I need her backing for my career progress, but will she use this sort of thing as evidence against me? There are some painful areas that are never discussed but need discussing so much. It's an awful dilemma for me.'
>
> (Fineman 1985,p. 52 cited in Hawkins & Shohet 2000,p. 25)

Tensions as outlined above will exist within the managerial supervisory relationship. It is important to acknowledge this factor whilst at the same time aiming to optimise the levels of trust and honesty within the relationship. Proctor sums up the challenge well when she says 'The task of the supervisor is to help him (the supervisee) feel received, valued, understood on the assumption that only then will he feel safe enough and open enough to review and challenge himself' (1988,p. 25).

Another function of supervision is educative. This focuses on the learning and development of the worker and aims to promote their understanding and skills. It involves helping the worker identify their needs in terms of skill development and training and supports the worker in pursuing these. However it is not only the worker who benefits in this regard; supervision is a place where both parties are continually learning. According to Sapin: 'Supervision can be a developmental process for both supervisees and supervisors as they learn from each others' practice and identify ways forward' (2009,p. 187). In relation to this educational element of supervision Turnbill asserts that supervision can be 'one of the most useful learning forums in our working lives' (2005,p. 216).

The final function of supervision is mediation. This refers to how supervision can facilitate communication and understanding between workers and management. For example, supervision can have a mediation role in helping to implement changes introduced by management. It can also facilitate the needs and issues of workers being made known to management. This can include needs in relation to training, resources, or other practical matters; e.g. 'people are feeling fed up that the staff meeting always runs over into lunch-time'.

Description of project

The author facilitated a one day training event in supervision for staff members at Cork YMCA in Ireland. This group consisted of six project coordinators who were responsible for supervising the workers on their programmes. The programmes included a youth training project, a young mothers' support group, a young women's training and development group, a health education outreach programme, and a youth information centre. The group was set up as part of an initiative to develop supervision practice in

the organisation as a normal and regular part of work for all workers at all levels. At the outset of the process was a commitment to, and recognition of, the importance of supervision; however the co-ordinators felt inexperienced and needed to demystify the process and develop confidence in this role. As one woman put it:

> *"I had quite an ambiguous understanding of what exactly it (supervision) meant and was actually quite confused about it. Now I feel the area has been clarified for me and I feel I have a better understanding of what it is exactly that I do in the role of supervisor, and equally what it is I gain from supervision myself".*

The author continued to meet the coordinators in a mentoring capacity on a monthly basis for a period of a year. In order to document and capture the participants' experiences of this process, including the learning gained, challenges encountered, and the impact of supervision at a number of levels within the organisation, the author carried out a structured review of the process with the supervisors group. This occurred towards the end of the year over which the group met. As part of this review the participants were encouraged to evaluate the supervision experience with their supervisees as it was felt that gaining the perspective of the workers being supervised would add to the insights and learning gained. The author then met with the supervisors group in order to review the training and mentoring process with them. A written questionnaire was used for this purpose, followed by a focus group discussion. This enabled the group to record their own reflections on the process and also provided an opportunity to develop these reflections through sharing their perspectives with one another through discussion. The areas explored in the review included: what were the most beneficial aspects of the supervision training and mentoring process; how could

this process have been improved; and what, in their view is the impact of supervision on supervisees, supervisors, the organisation, and young people as service users.

The group identified that they particularly valued the support they received from each other over the year as they worked through the struggles and rewards of being supervisors. They discovered that they are not alone in the challenges they face and have been a tremendous resource to one another in suggesting ways forward. Each of them feels they have changed and grown in this aspect of their work. As one co-ordinator says:

> *"I have become far more structured in my approach, much clearer on what is required and how to do it. I don't feel so much like I'm dropped in the deep end – I'm learning to swim!"*

Hawkins and Shohet acknowledge how daunting the prospect of providing supervision can be and state: 'Becoming, or being asked to be, a supervisor can be both exhilarating and daunting. Without training or support the task can be overwhelming' (2000,p. 39).

Whilst the lessons learnt from this staff development initiative cannot be generalised, the material generated from evaluating the experience does provide some valuable insights into benefits and challenges of the supervision process and the impact supervision can have at a number of levels within a youth work context.

The process of supervision

One of the biggest challenges in supervision practice is when there are varying levels of understanding and commitment to the process. One party might see supervision as a very valuable and essential aspect of youth work practice and another might not particularly see the point. Various factors influence people's perceptions of the relevance of supervision. Not least among these are the degree of clarity and

understanding of what supervision entails, people's previous histories of being supervised, and the level of commitment and support from agency management in relation to supervision.

At the outset of the supervision training and mentoring process the participants had varying degrees of understanding in relation to what supervision entailed. All of them were starting from a place of providing supervision to the staff they line-managed as this is agency policy, but in practice this varied considerably in terms of frequency and content. Having a lack of clarity around the purpose, format, and elements of supervision caused significant anxiety for group members. Hawkins and Shohet sum up the pressures often felt by supervisors: 'now that I am a supervisor I have to always be competent, be in control, have all the answers… and be relaxed!' (2000,p. 111). Over the duration of the training and subsequent mentoring sessions, a number of factors helped decrease their anxiety and increase their confidence in their role as supervisors.

Clarity around functions of supervision

The participants found it very helpful to understand supervision in terms of the four functions outlined above. Having a framework which identified the supportive, managerial, educative and mediation elements of supervision gave them a framework to work from. It also highlighted, for some, how their supervision was operating primarily out of one element to the neglect of the others. Most commonly their supervision was over weighted in terms of the supportive function. During the mentoring process they found it very useful to support each other and share their experiences of trying to rebalance the elements in their own practice.

Exploring supervision histories

A very influential factor in how we understand and approach supervision is our past experiences of receiving supervision. If we have experienced supervision as forum where our work is criticised and our 'to do' list lengthened, then understandably we may bring very large reservations about the value of supervision into our next supervisory relationship. During the supervision training the participants were encouraged to examine how their supervision histories have influenced their practice as supervisors. Participants found this a very enlightening exercise and realised that for many, what they valued in their own practice, was often as a result of a positive supervision experience they themselves had in the past. Conversely negative experiences can hinder a supervisor's (or a supervisee's) understanding of, and commitment to good quality effective supervision. This exercise was also a useful tool for supervisors to use with their own supervisees and helped to clarify and develop shared expectations around supervision.

Supervision contract

The idea of developing a supervision contract was new to most of the group participants. Establishing a contract at the outset of a supervisory relationship is a very useful way of discussing and recording the expectations, ground rules, and practical arrangements in relation to the supervision (Sapin 2009). A contract is drawn up jointly by both parties and usually covers the purpose of supervision, expectations, practical arrangements (where, when, how often), punctuality, cancellation arrangements, confidentiality, evaluating the supervision, and the responsibility of each party in terms of recording and formulating an agenda. Often for supervisors, it seems like an overly formal approach to what heretofore has been quite a relaxed and

casual process. However those supervisors in the group who introduced it into their supervision valued the clarity and focus it brought to the process. Their feedback in relation to this motivated others to incorporate the contract into their supervision also.

One of the challenges of supervision arises when one party experiences the process to be unsatisfactory in some way and finds it difficult to raise the issue with the other party (Morrison 2001). An example of this could be where the supervisor habitually cancels or reschedules the supervision session or perhaps the supervisee doesn't come to the session prepared with items for the agenda. Having a discussion at the outset of the supervisory relationship, using the contract as a vehicle to discuss ground rules in advance of issues arising, can prevent such problems developing. Where issues do arise, the agreed contract can be used as a back drop for the discussion. It is much easier to refer back to something which has already been discussed than to broach a difficult subject for the first time.

Session format

A common anxiety for supervisors is what format a supervision session should have. What should it look like? Over the mentoring period this developed as an issue for the group. How do you know you have discussed what needs to be discussed? What if all the time gets used up on one issue and there are other issues which need addressing? What if you as a supervisor are concentrating on a particular issue and you miss something of importance to the supervisee which s/he really needs to talk about? The discussions which resulted led to the development of a simple format for supervision which the author has incorporated into her training programme for other groups. The format is as follows:

- Brief overview of weeks since last supervision session

- Briefly identify highlights and lowlights
- Items for further discussion- agenda
- Supervisor's items for agenda
- Discussion and exploration of issues on agenda
- Review - identifying action points

By covering these areas the supervisor gets an overall qualitative picture of how the supervisee's work is going while at the same time there is opportunity to focus on and explore specific issues arising. Developing a simple format like this helps demystify the supervision process.

The impact of supervision

The group were very positive about the impact they felt supervision was having in the agency, whilst at the same time acknowledging the significant commitment required from coordinators, workers and management. In particular they specified benefits to staff receiving supervision, supervisors, the organisation, and service users.

Staff receiving supervision

The impact of supervision on staff being supervised included knowing they are heard and having an opportunity to resolve issues that arise at an early stage. This correlates with McNamara's (2008) observation that supervision helps ameliorate the affects of stress caused by challenging issues arising in youth work practice. Supervisees felt more supported in their work and sensed that the work they do is acknowledged and valued. Richmond (2009) emphasises the importance of workers feeling valued and supported through supervision and is of the view that by helping staff feel good about themselves, this in turn positively influences their ability to learn and develop.

Respondents also highlighted that supervision provided an opportunity for their training needs to be identified. This, as we have discussed already, is one of the key tasks of supervision within the educative function. According to the participants, whilst initially it required effort to establish clarity around the purpose and functions of supervision, overall the implementation of consistent supervision practice had the effect of improving relationships and reported a greater sense of teamwork.

In a study carried out by Wheeler and Kaye (2007), in which they conducted a comprehensive review of research concerning the impact of supervision on counsellors and their clients, they identified that supervision enhanced the skill development of practitioners, heightened their self awareness, and also increased their self efficacy (ability to produce the desired result). Turnbill (2005) echoes these findings as in her view the main aim of supervision is to maximise the confidence and competence of the youth worker.

Supervisors

For the supervisors supervision provided the opportunity to be more in tune with what is going on for individual staff members in relation to the work on the ground. This ties in with the mediation function of supervision discussed above. Supervisors also identified that the process of supervising staff helped them develop confidence in their roles as co-ordinators and supervisors. According to Hawkins and Shohet (2000) being a supervisor provides an opportunity to develop one's educative skills in helping other staff to learn and develop within their work. Consequently confidence in one's role develops and grows. Participants reported that at times it was difficult to find regular scheduled time amid the competing demands of youth work, this was

outweighed by the fact that they also found that their jobs became less stressful as a result of having regular, scheduled time with staff.

Organisation

For Cork YMCA, as an organisation, regular supervision was considered to have had the effect of improving the atmosphere of the agency and morale of staff. McNamara et al (2008) support this finding, as in their view supervision assists organisations in valuing staff. Hawkins and Shohet (2000) assert supervision contributes to increased levels of job satisfaction.

The support for and commitment to supervision by the manager of the organisation was a key factor in the success of the project. If those in management are not supportive and committed to supervision it is very difficult to introduce and sustain the practice on an ongoing and effective basis (Hawkins and Shohet 2000).

It was felt by respondents that the time and commitment needed to initiate and sustain regular supervision was worthwhile as in their experience supervision contributed to the work of projects being well planned, and efficiency and productivity increased. In support of this finding, McNamara et al (2008) claim that supervision facilitates workers in contributing effectively to the purpose of the organisation. Richmond (2009) corroborates this view in highlighting the role supervision has in ensuring high standards of service delivery are maintained.

Participants also reported that there was a better communication flow within the organisation, resulting in a greater sense of cohesion. This demonstrates that the mediation function of supervision in assisting communication within the agency can contribute to a sense of solidarity among staff as a whole.

Service users

In light of their review of research on the impact of supervision, Wheeler and Kaye (2007) conclude that establishing the effects of supervision on service users is difficult. However they do assert that given that supervision offers opportunities for the supervisee to improve practice and gain in confidence, this in turn raises the likelihood that client outcome is improved as a result of supervision.

In the view of respondents, service users at Cork YMCA were considered to have benefited from the development of supervision practices in that they were participating in programmes which were more efficient and better able to respond to their needs. They also highlighted that staff being less stressed meant they were able to be more present and available to young people. This finding is supported by Wheeler and Kaye's (2007) review in that they found that emotional support from supervision benefits workers and ensures they are not distracted by their own emotions.

According to participants, improved atmosphere and a sense of teamwork was evident in projects which contributed to a sense of well being for both staff and young people. Overall, it was felt supervision contributed to a better quality service being delivered to the users of Cork YMCA.

McNamara et al strongly link supervision to the quality of services experienced by young people, and they state:

> 'Only by asserting the centrality of supervision to professional youth work practice will young people remain at its heart, and continue to achieve positive and life enhancing experiences' (2008,p. 87).

Conclusion

This paper began by defining supervision and exploring its key functions. The relatively limited occurrence of supervision within youth work was highlighted and paper advocated strongly that the demanding nature of youth work practice necessitates that supervision is central to effective practice in this field. The paper proceeded to outline a staff development project initiated by Cork YMCA, aimed at training and supporting coordinators in their supervision of workers. The learning gained as a result their experiences of supervising youth workers was explored and a discussion regarding the process of supervision ensued. This was followed by an exploration of the impact of supervision at the levels of staff receiving supervision, supervisors, the organisation, and service users. Some significant themes emerge from the research findings. Most notably how supervision contributed to improving inter-staff communication and increasing staff and organisational morale. Staff reported feeling less stressed and the contribution of employees was felt to be acknowledged and valued. While the development of supervision practice required considerable input on the part of those involved; it was felt that overall, supervision facilitated an improved level of service delivery and a greater sense of teamwork within the organisation.

The learning gained from this project indicates the potential benefits to youth work practitioners, organisations, and young people, of regular managerial supervision which has a clear focus and is balanced in terms of the supportive, managerial, educative and mediation functions.

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