

Supervision: Using the evidence to support our practice



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ABSTRACT

The function of supervision is to make people safe, quality practitioners. They feel able to do the job to the best of their ability and to give their clients the maximum service they can within a cost effective system and the confines of their service delivery.
(Ormond, 2004)

Supervision is an activity that, when effective, contributes significantly to service delivery and the ongoing learning and development of staff. Conversely, an organisation dedicating considerable time to an activity that is not benefiting practitioners and clients actually detracts from direct service provision. A national supervision project was commenced in October 2004 to maximise the effectiveness of supervision in the Ministry of Education – Special Education (GSE). One of the goals of this project was to develop a national supervision framework outlining the key indicators of effective supervision.

A reference group was formed of thirteen staff spread across regions, tiers of the organisation, occupational groups and cultural perspectives, as well as extent of experience with GSE and with supervision. The group took an evidence-based approach to the project, with the term “supervision” encompassing professional, clinical and cultural supervision. This evidence-based approach was conceptualised as the intersection between the research evidence, practitioner expertise and the lived experiences of the people involved. Therefore, information was gathered from three main sources: a literature review (the research evidence), interviews with twelve luminaries in the field of supervision (practitioner expertise) and an internal online survey (the lived experience of the people involved). Additionally, reference group members scoped existing supervision practices in their districts and regions.

The online survey, which had a response rate of nearly 40 percent, gathered a variety of quantitative and qualitative information on the current practices of staff in relation to supervision. Results from the survey, enhanced with information from districts, were used to develop a snapshot of supervision within the organisation. This snapshot was examined against the effective practices outlined by the literature and key luminaries, and informed the development of GSE's national supervision framework.

This article seeks to synthesise the evidence underpinning each of the key themes, examine them against the current picture of supervision with GSE and translate them into practical ways of enriching supervision practices.

Supervision helps a person reach their highest potential in their work and personal life.
(Ormond, 2004)

Research paper

KEYWORDS:

Supervision, organisational climate, reflection.

Five key themes emerged across the evidence on supervision, highlighting the importance of fostering an organisational climate of supervision, contextualised approaches to supervision, supporting self-regulated learning, strong relationships and an outcomes focus.

1. DEVELOPING A CLIMATE OF SUPERVISION THROUGHOUT THE ORGANISATION

A burgeoning climate of supervision exists already in GSE, primarily with practitioners. How can this climate be expanded to include all GSE staff, including management, administration and support staff?

Approximately half of the psychologists, special education advisors, speech-language therapists and occupational therapists responded to the internal survey on supervision. Eighty percent of the respondents report that they receive supervision; almost half of the respondents (46 percent) supervise others, in most cases (66 percent) they supervise one to two people. Examining this data by occupational group, all advisors on deaf children (ADC), as well as approximately half of the early intervention teachers, occupational therapists, psychologists and physiotherapists supervise others.

There was a limited response to the survey from managers and support staff. A significant number of the managers that responded, (75 percent of district managers, 57 percent of team leaders, 23 percent of service managers) indicated that they do not have supervision or that their supervision is with their line manager. Although the responses from administration staff were high, they illustrated varying perceptions of supervision and 33 percent had concerns or were dissatisfied with their current supervision arrangements.

Individual supervision is most effective when supported by an organisational climate of supervision. Cultivating “communities of practice” around supervision provides one way of furthering this climate. Wenger (2005) defines communities of practice as groups who are bound together by shared activities, with an emphasis on collaboration and the creation and sharing of information and practice. This framework supports staff in reaching the overarching goals of supervision: professional development, personal and professional support, and maintenance of standards (Annan, 2005). While supervision practices may look different across different groups of staff, for example administration staff, growing supervision as a shared practice across the organisation would allow groups to learn from one another as well.

The Climate of Supervision Should Be Modelled From The Top

I totally and utterly believe that supervision is for every single person, from the CEO down, for everybody. That's the way you model what it's about. How can you say "You must have supervision" if managers aren't receiving it themselves? Also, until you start having supervision you don't know what it is and you don't understand the value of what it is. So, for managers who have the responsibility to ensure supervision is available and happens, they've got to value it themselves. Then everyone who is being supervised is a supervisor and so on: a ripple effect.

(Hawken, 2004)

Learning organisations are comprised of people that, individually and collectively, make changes in response to external influences, new knowledge and self-review (Senge, 1993, in Jensen, Malcolm, Phelps & Stoker, 2002). Supervision provides the context and relationships vital for reflecting upon and changing our practices, necessary at every level of the organisation. Supervision also makes practice more visible and tacit attitudes and processes more explicit, creating opportunities for open discussion and change.

In engendering a climate of supervision throughout GSE, as with any large scale initiative, thought should be given to how best to engage staff, especially those for whom supervision is not currently seen as a priority. Schiemann (1995, cited in Jensen, Malcolm, Phelps & Stokes, 2002) identifies five strategies for supporting change in organisations:

1. A climate where growth and change are expected, encouraged and modelled at all levels.
2. Sufficient planning and dialogue with those who will be impacted.
3. Adequate follow up, including continued communication and support.
4. Consensus from management around what will be done.
5. Sufficient skills of those driving the change and those expected to change, fostered through training and other support.

These strategies require modelling, consultation and careful planning from key leaders in the organisation.

A leader is someone that others follow rather than someone who directs so good role modelling within the service is needed.
(Russell, 2004)

Raising Expectations Around The Purpose And Outcomes Of Formal Supervision

Eighty-five percent of GSE respondents reported they are satisfied or very satisfied with the skill level of their supervisor. While this is a significant number and offers a positive platform on which to build, when considered alongside snapshots of supervision practice in the districts, this might indicate a need to raise people's expectations about what can be achieved through supervision. Current supervision arrangements might offer more support than challenge, or perhaps some staff have nothing with which to compare their current supervision.

Additionally, the current thrust within the Ministry for more of an outcomes focus compels individuals and the organisation as a whole to re-examine the way supervision supports outcomes for practitioners, their clients and the organisation.

Establish Clear Guidelines Around The Frequency, Regularity And Intentionality Of Supervision

Effective supervision is structured, intentional and ongoing (Hawken, 2004). Currently, supervision has an element of discretion as the frequency is largely determined by individual staff. Sixty percent of respondents receive supervision weekly or fortnightly, with an additional 23 percent getting supervision “as needed”. Eighty-two percent of respondents access cultural supervision “as needed”. This leaves a significant number of staff receiving infrequent, or no supervision. These findings signal the need for national agreement on what triggers the need for supervision, from whom, and for what purpose. We need to “formalise what already happens in an ad hoc way, by giving it a structure and making it an intentional relationship” (Hawken, 2004). Twenty percent of respondents indicated they do not receive supervision because they do not have access to an appropriate person; 21 percent say they do not have supervision because they get their needs met in other ways. This evidence concurs with Annan and Ryba's (2003) survey of 31 educational psychologists in GSE, where 91 percent reported satisfaction with their supervision arrangement, but of these 28 percent were not receiving formal supervision. Still, staff were satisfied they met the overarching supervisory goals of personal and or professional support, professional development and accountability through a range of integrated activities. These included informal supervision (100 percent), teaming (94 percent), formal supervision (81 percent), professional gatherings (65 percent), professional literature (58 percent) and self-reflection (55 percent). Many of these activities are based on professional connectedness, which is the degree to which we engage with others to support our own learning.

The GSE national supervision framework should therefore seek to validate the ranges of ways people meet the broad goals of supervision while assuming the additional need for formal supervision. Likewise, formal supervision should not be the only form of support and challenge that a person receives (Hunter and Blair, 1999).

As An Organisation Promoting Safe And Effective Supervision Practices, We Should Clarify Who Uses This Information And For What Purpose

It's really important to have worked out the feedback, the communication, what goes from the supervision session and how does it go, who's involved and where is the transparency. So, it's having very clear diagrams of the feedback loops.

(Hawken, 2004)

According to the survey data, 77 percent of respondents reported that their manager knows who their supervisor is but 16 percent were not sure. Seventy-three percent record the time they spend being supervised on their diary sheet and 60 percent record time they spend as supervisors. The amount of specific information that goes to management also varies, with some staff informing their manager only that supervision has occurred, while others provide a summary of topics and any follow-up actions.

Consistently used reporting mechanisms are crucial for measuring the effectiveness of supervision. For instance, because both partners benefit from supervision, one slot on diary sheets could be used for time spent in supervision. This would allow for national data collection. Managers should ensure that their team members have appropriate supervision arrangements detailed by negotiated supervision agreements. Managers should be informed that supervision has occurred, while the supervision partners keep a record of the content of sessions. Six-monthly supervision updates, jointly written by the supervision partners, can also be used to update management on progress towards supervision goals while maintaining the confidentiality of the supervision relationship (Hawken, 2004).

The supervision agreement should outline when confidentiality is broken, how and to whom. For instance, if concerns have not been resolved in the supervision relationship, one person must inform the other that the concern will be taken outside the relationship. Ideally, the supervision partners would then go together to this person, who has already been identified in their supervision agreement.

2. CONTEXTUALISED APPROACH

With anyone who comes to supervision, we should seek to understand who they are and where they are from, their background, what's important to them, their values, what is a strength for them and what is difficult for them within their context.

(Ormond, 2004)

Having a contextualised approach to supervision involves considering the cultural background of the person, understanding the person in their context and seeing supervision as part of the whole of learning supports for that person. Part of understanding the cultural background of Māori supervisors, for instance, requires considering their accountability back to whānau. Māori supervisors often link first to their supervision partner's whānau, hapū and iwi. They then account to their partner's clients' whānau, hapū and iwi. Third, they link to their own whānau, hapū, iwi and, fourth, to the organisation they work for. This poses potential tension for Māori staff, as often organisations believe staff's primary responsibility is to the organisation (Webber-Dreadon, 2004).

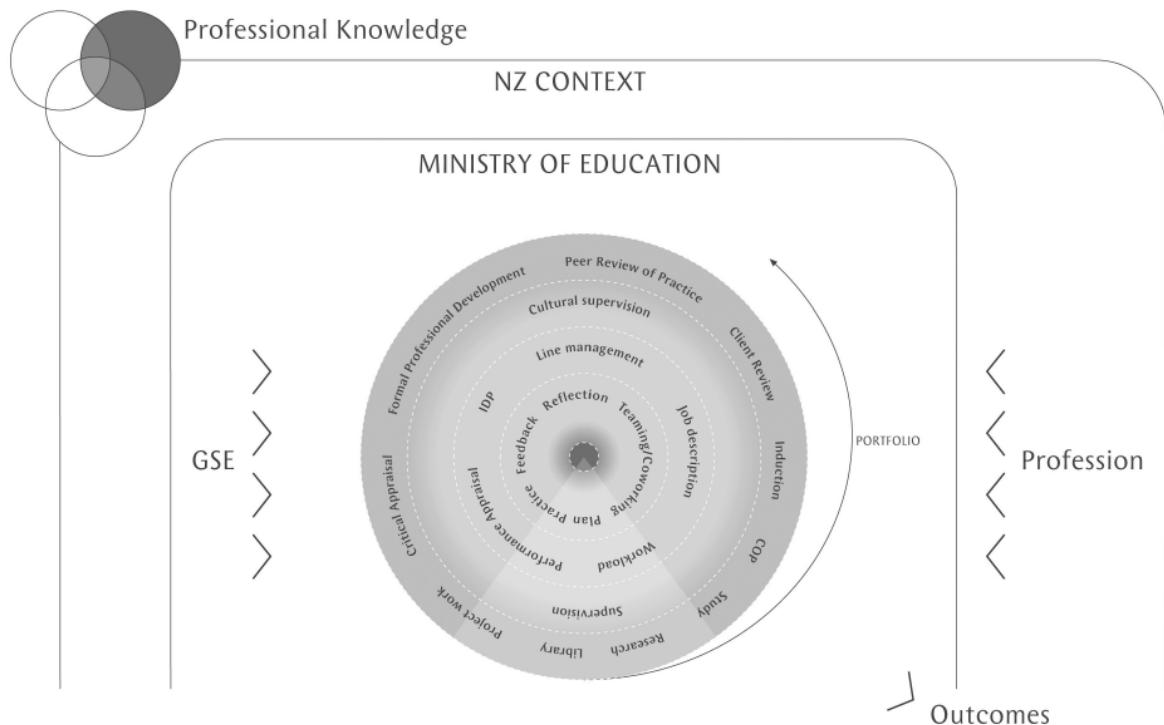
Understanding the person in their context involves viewing individuals as inseparable from the layers of their social systems (Sheridan and Gutkin, 2000). Accordingly, supervision should provide an explicit and intentional opportunity to reflect on practice and the wider variables, such as work-life balance, that may be impacting on practice. In the same way that individuals are viewed in their context, supervision should be seen as just one of the activities people engage in to support their personal and professional growth. Learning supports include other, complementary activities, such as co-working and informal supervision.

A Synchronised Approach

A synchronised approach to supporting ongoing learning should be developed, and supervision should be mapped within the range of professional learning supports available to staff. Professional learning is an individual responsibility and ultimately benefits the individual as well as the children, families, schools and early childhood centres with whom they interact. The benefits for individuals and the organisation are maximised when the approach to ongoing learning is planned and interconnected. Additionally, support and engagement from staff are increased when they can make links across national, regional and local initiatives and directly to their service delivery.

In 2004, Te Pataka GSE's data system, indicated that approximately sixty percent of GSE practitioner time is attributed to direct service delivery with the remainder spent on additional activities. Each non-direct activity, such as supervision, has the potential to contribute significantly to, or detract from, service delivery; this depends on the quality of the activity. Staff are best supported in their pursuit of ongoing learning by an integrated approach, which outlines each activity in terms of its purpose, how it can improve services (especially from the point of view of schools and families) and how it marries with other activities. This framework for supporting ongoing learning should also link daily activities to higher level strategic directions.

Professional Development and Learning in GSE



The particular supports any one practitioner will draw on can then be individualised according to the context of the work, such as the degree of visibility and risk, where people are at developmentally and their degree of connectedness to others. For instance, a seasoned practitioner working in a large, supportive team and co-working the majority of her work will have different needs to a new graduate doing high-risk work in a remote area with little peer support. The latter practitioner might engage more frequently in some organisational supports, such as the peer review of practice, client review and formal supervision.

As staff identify learning goals, assisted by the performance review cycle, they should examine the levels of professional development, support and accountability they will achieve incidentally in their interactions with others. They can then identify additional supports that are needed to support their ongoing learning, and develop measurable outcomes of their learning for themselves, their clients and the organisation.

GRID OF PROFESSIONAL CONNECTEDNESS “PERSONAL PATH”

Outcomes for the child, family, whānau – Outcomes for the practitioner – Outcomes for the organisation

	Personal/Professional Support	Professional Development	Accountability/ Maintenance of Standards
Formal supervision			
Informal supervision			
Professional learning conversations			
Co-working/Teaming			
Reading the literature			
Attending workshops			
Consultation			
Work with children and families/Whānau			
Work with schools and EC centres			

When the individual development plan is developed collaboratively, the practitioner, potential/existing supervisor and line manager gain a clear understanding of how contextual supports, such as co-working and informal supervision, contribute to the practitioner's ongoing learning and development. They also identify the explicit ways in which formal supervision can supplement the current arrangement, in terms of connectedness and ongoing learning (Annan, 2005) and how that learning will be demonstrated in terms of client outcomes (Ormond, 2004). Several key informants note the importance of taking goals determined in the performance appraisal into supervision, and the aforementioned activities provide a strength-based process for achieving this.

3. SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

Supervision is a place to produce oneself as an ethical and effective practitioner.
(Crockett, 2002)

Reflective practice is an essential component of self-regulated learning, and collective reflective practice is a key ingredient of effective supervision. Self-regulated learning involves the ability to organise and evaluate one's self and work, set goals and learning plans, and monitor ones' actions and progress toward those goals (Wilson, 1998; Zimmerman, 1990, in Lizzio and Wilson, 2002). Practitioners and managers discuss the limited time they have for systematically reflecting on their practice. Supervision safeguards this time and space, allowing them to critically examine the intended and unintended consequences of our ways of working (Russell, 2004). Supervision is also a place for reflective listening (Drysdale, 2004), supporting people to explore the practice wisdom, policies and values and beliefs that influence their decision making (Munnely, 2004). From a Māori perspective, the supervision process embodies the gift of reciprocity. Both supervision partners give, receive and share the knowledge they each have, supporting their combined search for 'best practice' (Webber-Dreadon, 2004).

Our approach to supervision, as with our work, needs to be strengths based and solution-focused. Supervision represents several developmental pathways: our journey from novice to expert as a practitioner (Brenner, 1982), with this particular organisation, with supervision, and in this particular supervision relationship (McMahon and Patton, 2002). The nature of supervision should vary for individuals, and should change over time to reflect their movement along these pathways. For instance, a new therapist may bring concrete examples from practice, leaving supervision with specific ideas on how to approach certain cases. Later, discussion might encompass more general themes across casework, such as using strengths-based approaches or working through resistance to change (Thomas, 2004).

Supervision also acknowledges the wider range of experience a person brings with them, which parallels the process with which practitioners approach their work with others (Drysdale, 2004; Munnely, 2004). Using strengths-based and solution-focused approaches to supervision models encourages us to do the same with our clients (Thomas,

2004). In both cases, it is important to understand the learner in terms of their strengths and learning styles, and to value the person through acknowledgement and respect (Ormond, 2004).

I don't necessarily subscribe to the 'clean slate' point of view; everyone comes with something that can be built on.
(Thomas, 2004)

Supervision Should Empower

The supervisor doesn't have the answers, because it's about the person being the expert in who they are and it's about drawing out from the person his or her own answers.
(Hawken, 2004)

Supervision is increasingly driven by the principles of adult learning, such as self assessment and self review, in an action reflection model (Drysdale, 2004). Practitioners set and meet their own learning goals with the support of their supervision partner and others. Individuals drive the supervision process by finding the appropriate partner, then facilitating the processes of contracting, preparing and negotiating agendas, and ongoing review. They also carry out the work in between (Hunter and Blair, 1999, Doolan, 2004). When practitioners are not happy with the supervision relationship, it is their responsibility to address that (Ormond, 2004). Individuals also have a duty to align supervision with their professional development goals and to supplement formal supervision with other supports for ongoing learning: informal supervision and consultation, co-working and teaming, attending professional gatherings, professional reading and engaging in various Communities of Practice (GSE National supervision framework, 2005).

The task of evaluation is not on the supervisor. Rather, it is the practitioner's responsibility to use supervision to help them to gain evidence of their ongoing learning and competency (Ford, 2004). The supervisor's role is largely that of initiating inquiry, highlighting examples of constructive change, and supporting practitioner growth through relevant ideas, reactions, comments and suggestions (Lowe and Guy, in McMahon and Patton, 2002).

As an organisation, our specific actions should illustrate our desire to empower the practitioner. For instance, managers should work directly with the practitioner to suggest topics which might be discussed in supervision, but never go directly to the supervision partner. Practitioners should also be supported to choose their own supervisor. The 77 percent of respondents who chose their own supervisor had significantly higher rates (90 percent compared to 77 percent) of satisfaction, highlighting the importance of choice.

Importantly, staff report that supervision is often cancelled due to the more pressing demands of service provision. Managers encourage supervision to remain a priority by supporting the workload management of team members. This includes supporting supervisors, ensuring they can still effectively supervise the number of staff they are committed to in addition to other demands on their time.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Irrespective of the specific approach, it is the quality of the relationship that is the most important determinant of effective supervision. Therefore, time needs to be allowed for the relationship building.
(McMahon, 2002)

There is a belief in this world, in the Māori world, that everything that occurs in the context of a relationship – it is not isolated into the behavioural; it occurs in a relationship of some sort.
(Huata, 2004)

Time should be spent on the process of establishing and maintaining an effective supervision relationship. Forty-one percent of the internal survey respondents did not know whether their supervisor had training in supervision; this might indicate variability in terms of how supervision partnerships are initiated and explored.

Prior to establishing the relationship, it is important to conduct an exploratory meeting. Individuals share initial thinking on their ongoing learning needs and goals, how they are connected to other forms of ongoing learning and how supervision might be used to meet their goals. Additionally, McMahon and Patton (2002) suggest they share previous types of supervision (what has worked and what has not), how they see the role of each supervision partner and what they seek in a supervision partner. Supervisors could have a resume prepared for the exploratory meeting, outlining approaches, expectations of both supervision partners, and what they see as their strengths as a supervisor (McMahon and Patton, 2002).

The exploratory meeting gives both parties a chance to clarify expectations with no obligation to begin a formal relationship. When two or more people decide to continue into that relationship, the next stage is developing a supervision agreement. Constructing this agreement allows supervision partners the opportunity to establish the parameters of the relationship, for example, the frequency and length of time of supervision, and the roles and responsibilities. The process for taking information to others, such as management, should also be clarified.

Agreements should initially be short-term and reviewed after six sessions, then every six months to one year (Drysdale, 2004; Munnely, 2004; Ormond, 2004). Setting and reviewing goals is paramount, as supervisory needs change over time.

You are so many different roles as a supervisor that sometimes people outgrow you; this may not be addressed and that's when frustration and lack of motivation can kick in.
(Ormond, 2004)

Additionally, a potential danger of long term peer supervision is that it may provide more support than challenge, and lack accountability (Drysdale, 2004).

A key component of effective supervision is an agenda, which is initiated by the person seeking supervision and negotiated and prioritised by all parties prior to the start of the session. Notes are taken, agreed on at the end and reviewed before

the next session; there is agreement around who is responsible for following up on the actions generated in supervision.

The relationship actually proves to be more important than the model.
(Drysdale, 2004)

Effective Supervision Acknowledges Issues Of Power Sharing And Combines Support, Challenge And Inspiration

The best form of relationship is one based on social power and not structural power. It needs to be a very safe relationship so that you bring along your biggest worries, your deepest concerns ...

Whereas, if the line manager is the supervisor, you are always protecting your back because this is the person who has the control.

(Hewson, 2004)

The majority (88 percent) of respondents have supervision with someone other than their line manager, and their rates of dissatisfaction are significantly lower (11 percent to 30 percent). To avoid potential role conflict, such as power imbalances and dual relationships, it is recommended that line managers are not also supervisors. Ideally, practitioners select their own supervisor to align with their identified goals for supervision. In the rare situations where the supervision partner remains the line manager, clarity and separation of roles is critical (GSE supervision framework, 2005).

Irrespective of levels of status in the organisation, the partners should work towards an equal relationship within supervision (Drysdale, 2004). This relationship is characterised by an effective balance of support, challenge and inspiration (McCashen, 2000). Supervision partners establish a safe environment and foster strong relationships alongside those with whom they have supervision. They thoughtfully participate in the educative and facilitative process that is supervision. Supervision partners provide support and inspiration while recognising and challenging unhelpful patterns (Russell, 2004).

You are there to facilitate growth; you are not just there to help them survive.
(Hawken, 2004)

5. OUTCOMES FOCUS

You have got people working for you for longer, you have got happy motivated workers: people who feel in control of their caseload. As they are feeling more effective, you will hopefully get less burnout and less staleness. Ultimately I would imagine that you would have a greater sense of team because people will feel valued and respected. You get effective team workers and everybody evaluating themselves in supervision. Supervision produces greater self awareness and an understanding that you can continually strive.
(Ormond, 2004)

Just as education exists to make a tangible difference to the lives of children with special needs (GSE Toolkit, 2005), supervision exists to make a tangible difference to

practitioner skills and knowledge so that they might work more effectively with colleagues, peers and clients. The current international thrust, in education and other sectors, is towards an outcomes focus. This means concentrating less on inputs, such as hours spent in supervision, and more on the results of effective supervision. In terms of learning goals, what progress have we made due to supervision? How do we know? How does that progress in turn increase our effectiveness with the children, family, schools and early childhood centres with whom we work? How can we demonstrate that increased effectiveness?

In moving to a stronger outcomes approach to supervision, key questions to consider are:

- What are the main outcomes that you are trying to achieve or contribute to in supervision?
- Why these outcomes of supervision rather than other outcomes?
- How can the outcomes be achieved through supervision?
- How will you know that the desired outcomes have been achieved?
- How will you measure these outcomes from supervision?

(Adapted from GSE Action Plan Toolkit, 2005.)

Supervision can be linked to outcomes at the individual practitioner, client and organisational level. For individuals, Lizzio and Wilson (in McMahon and Patton, 2002) identify six potential outcomes of supervision – systemic competence, role efficacy, technical skills, personal development, conceptual competence and ethical judgment – with the overarching goal of self-regulated learning. Supervision provides opportunities for shared reflection and learning in a cost-effective, authentic environment. It provides opportunities to practice new skills, including facilitation skills. Practitioners gain a better understanding of what others are doing, have access to more challenge and support, and ultimately supervision engenders team building (McCashen, 2000).

Individual outcomes often overlap with outcomes for clients and the organisation. For instance, effective supervision reduces stress and supports the maintenance of professional standards, resulting in better quality services to clients (Hunter and Blair, 1999). The responsibility of the individual, with the support of the supervisor and/or line manager, is to identify how they will meet their goals (in part through supervision) and how they will evidence that learning in the form of outcomes for themselves, the organisation and their clients (Ormond, 2004).

*We all have responsibility to be the best
we can be for our clients.
(Russell, 2004)*

Ongoing Training

*I think the training is crucial because if you don't have it then what you learn is the way you were supervised and if that wasn't particularly good then you just repeat the mistakes
(Munnelly, 2004)*

Ongoing training of staff leads to shared understanding, higher transfer of training into practice, and increased competency. Staff currently learn about supervision from a range of sources, contributing to a high variation in quality and approaches. Training available to all staff, focusing on their role within a learning organisation, would cultivate a shared understanding and further the climate and effectiveness of supervision. According to the survey data, current rates of dissatisfaction with supervision are highest for ADCs, a group which is required to supervise others when only half of them report receiving any training themselves.

Rates of satisfaction with supervision were significantly higher (97 compared to 71 percent) when the practitioner perceived that their supervisor was trained in supervision. Rates of satisfaction were also higher (17 percent to 12 percent) when staff themselves had been trained, indicating that training supports staff to be better consumers of supervision. Additionally, Annan and Ryba (2003) found that, when prioritising desired supervisor characteristics, practitioners first wanted expertise, followed by trust and theoretical orientation. Training, of course, does not equal competency, as competency is a combination of qualifications, ongoing learning and development and experience.

CONCLUSION

The GSE national supervision project sought to identify key indicators of effective supervision across a range of sources. Five key themes emerged across the evidence on supervision, highlighting the importance of an organisational climate of supervision, contextualised approaches supporting self-regulated learning, strong relationships and an outcomes focus. This article has sought to summarise the five themes and to make practical suggestions for how this evidence can translate into improved supervision practices.

The next step for practitioners is using this information to reflect on our own supervision relationship. Which aspects are we doing really well? Which of our actions fit with the key indicators? How can each of us further contribute to a climate of supervision in our office? Are there specific ways I can better support my own learning and my relationship with my supervision partner? Does the approach I take to supervision mirror the way I work with clients? How do I know my supervision is effective; can I demonstrate specific benefits for myself and my clients?

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