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Making the transition from practitioner to supervisor: reflections on the contribution made by a post-qualifying supervisory course

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ABSTRACT
Within Scotland, as elsewhere, there has been a resurgence of interest in the critical role of supervision within social work practice. However, those in transition from practitioner to supervisor still commonly report feeling unprepared for their changing role and uncertain about what it entails. This paper will explore our experiences of delivering an accredited post-qualifying supervision course since 2008 to professionals from different sectors, diverse professional backgrounds, and with varying levels of supervisory experience. The course provides time and space to think about the different elements of supervision, and to consider how these translate into day-to-day practice. We will argue that the opportunity to explore the complexity of the supervisory task, while learning from and with peers, is an important part of making the transition in professional role and identity. Moreover, in organisational contexts where the reflective space which supervision can provide may feel under threat, and where the focus on people who use services can at times be lost, professional staff undertaking supervision training describe feeling more confident and competent in their role, with renewed commitment both to uphold the value of reflective supervision, and to sustain a clear emphasis on people who use services.

KEYWORDS
Supervision; post-qualifying course; interprofessional supervision; reflection; learning

Introduction

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in the role played by supervision within social work practice. This is evidenced in the burgeoning literature addressing different facets of the supervisory process, in policy documents at national and local level and in heightened awareness of the professional development needs of both novice and experienced supervisors. Despite this, the quality and consistency of training opportunities remains variable and it is common for staff newly promoted to a first-line management role to feel lacking in skills and confidence for the shift in professional identity and transition from practitioner to supervisor.

This paper reflects a conviction that supervision has a vital contribution to make to 'thoughtful practice' (Ruch, 2007) and that challenging but supportive learning experiences can enhance workers' understanding of the supervisory task and their capacity to sustain responsive and reflective supervision in the face of conflicting demands. Examples from a post-qualifying module in professional supervision illustrate how participants are able to critically examine and reflect upon their supervisory practice together with peers from diverse organisations and professional backgrounds. The course provides a neutral space set apart from workplace pressures, and one where staff can exchange ideas and question the key principles that underpin their approach to supervision. Collaborative learning offers perspective on organisational culture and enables supervisors to explore

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the tensions that may exist between policy rhetoric and the reality of direct practice. While acknowledging the factors that can lead to managerial priorities taking precedence, the value of reflective supervision is strongly affirmed as well as the need to hold clearly in mind the people whose lives are most impacted by professional intervention and decision-making.

The first section sets the context of social work supervision and the changes brought about by service integration with its concomitant mix of professional disciplines, cultures and expertise. The impact of managerialism on the balance of functions within supervision is highlighted, in particular, the risk of undermining a reflective space with detrimental consequences for safe practice. There are indications, however, of the tide turning as the limitations of target-driven, task-oriented performance management are increasingly acknowledged and, at a policy level at least, there is evidence of a revival of interest in more holistic professional supervision. This is accompanied, to some extent, by recognition of supervisors' training needs although there remains variation both in the training opportunities available and the formal standards expected for supervisory practice.

The main section of the paper explores some of the learning points that have emerged from a post-qualifying course in professional supervision delivered in Scotland over the past eight years. Following a brief overview of the course, we discuss the value of collaborative learning across different sectors, specialisms and managerial roles including the levelling experience and appreciation of alternative perspectives achieved through shared dialogue. For new supervisors this can support the reconciling of professional and managerial identities (Patterson, 2015) and 'the move from being one of "us" to one of "them"' (White, 2009, p. 140), while for established managers, it offers scope to revisit and strengthen their commitment to supervision as a vital means of supporting and developing staff as well as monitoring standards.

We go on to present an example of how theory, which informs the teaching, can translate directly into participants' supervisory work. Mirroring, or parallel process, is well established within psychodynamic theory (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Mattinson, 1975), and the interplay between direct practice and supervision has more recently been recognised as a two-way process where organisational culture and management style can influence the quality of practitioners' engagement with the people they work with (Munro, 2011; Pine & Healy, 2007). The formal learning environment provides its own opportunities to mirror supervision practice both in planned activities, for example supervision triad work, but also in unanticipated ways where the impact can be far reaching.

Reflective supervision is central to the taught course and, whilst appreciating the need for clear decision-making and accountability, emphasis is also placed on the importance of 'not-knowing' and holding open a space for uncertainty. The value of negative capability (Cornish, 2011) is exemplified in action learning sets (Burgess, 1999; Revans, 1980) used both as a model of group supervision and a structured reflective process in which participants practice skills of working with complexity while holding back from trying immediately to 'fix' a problem. Together with experiential work in triads, action learning also affirms the emotional dimension of supervision. It invites engagement at the level of both head and heart rather than splitting off the rational, thinking self from the inner world of feelings. Despite knowledge and experience of the emotional impact of practice, practitioners and managers alike can struggle to find the balance between professional competence and personal vulnerability.

The supportive function of supervision walks a fine line, with concern from some that undue focus may be placed on staff well-being (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997). Hawkins and Shohet (2012) have redefined this aspect as 'resourcing', stressing mutuality and shared responsibility within the supervisory relationship. Beddoe and Davys (2016) use starker language, identifying 'personal survival' as one of the three lenses through which contemporary supervision can be viewed. Earlier writers have described the supervisor's task as making the supervisee more effective in their helping role (Hess, 1980) but there are ever-increasing expectations that beneficial outcomes for people using services need to be evidenced. The challenge is far from straightforward, with causal attribution being

manifestly difficult to prove but, at the very least, attention has been drawn to the 'absent presence' in the supervision space. Feedback from course participants consistently highlights this as a pivotal learning motif: the realisation that the child or adult's experience has become lost amidst concerns about risk, budgets, procedures and a myriad of other factors. Finding ways to keep supervision clearly focused on those whose well-being is at stake is of critical importance.

Setting the context

There is a sense of supervision having incrementally shifted from the background into the spotlight of social work practice. In part this can be linked to high-profile inquiries spanning services for children and adults, many of which have highlighted shortcomings in both the quality and consistency of supervision available to front-line staff (Flynn & Citarella, 2012; Laming, 2003, 2009; O'Brien, 2003). Similar concerns are reflected in key policy documents (Munro, 2011; Scottish Executive, 2006) with recognition that managerial and target-driven cultures have negatively impacted on the balance of functions within supervision, in particular the 'quiet space' (Beddoe, 2010, p. 1293) for reflection. This critical reappraisal has been accompanied by an expanding body of literature aimed at those in a supervisory role (Beddoe & Davys, 2016; Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Morrison, 2005; Thompson & Gilbert, 2011; Wonnacott, 2012, 2014) with debates around the implications of interprofessional working (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Bostock, 2015; Davys & Beddoe, 2008); the training and development needs of supervisors (Hair, 2013); international perspectives including cultural competence (Beddoe, 2015; Bradley, Engelbrecht, & Hojer, 2010; O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2011) and the relatively weak evidence base for the impact of supervision on outcomes for people using services (Carpenter, Webb, Bostock, & Coomber, 2012; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009).

Service integration and experiences of cross-disciplinary supervision highlight both the challenges and enhancement offered when teams comprise staff with different professional backgrounds and expertise. Structural changes in service provision have provided a catalyst for practitioners, managers and academics alike to re-evaluate the interplay of functions within supervision with the separation of line management and clinical responsibilities being one solution (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010; Social Care Institute of Excellence, 2013). The benefits and drawbacks of this divide have been explored (Bradley & Hojer, 2009) and, more recently, attention has turned to supervision that crosses professional boundaries (Beddoe & Howard, 2012; Bostock, 2015; Hutchings, Cooper, & O'Donoghue, 2014). This invites helpful focus on what supervisors bring to the process when they cannot rely on shared professional identity and practice experiences. While there is general consensus on the significance of profession-specific supervision for newly qualified workers, there is also recognition of the added value which cross-disciplinary supervision can bring including within interprofessional training: 'Different knowledge, different perspectives and different world-views contributed to a broader and deeper understanding both of supervision and of each other' (Davys & Beddoe, 2008, p. 67).

Erosion of the reflective space which supervision should offer has been a persistent theme for many years (Jones & Gallop, 2003; Lawler, 2015). The pressure on social services in the context of reduced budgets and demographic changes has intensified workload demands on first-line managers potentially undermining their capacity to provide regular balanced supervision. In the third sector, funding cuts have required many organisations to reduce the frequency of supervision or replace one-to-one supervision with group sessions (Cunningham, 2011). One of the arguments for clinical supervision distinct from managerial oversight is to keep professional issues centre-stage. There is concern that the focus has tended to narrow down to the 'technical–rational' aspects of practice, the 'what' and 'when', rather than the complex, messy and uncertain human dimensions including the 'why', the 'how' and the emotional impact (Ruch, 2012). Pithouse (1987) has argued that social work is an invisible trade, and that supervision is a place where practice could and should be made visible. The concept of 'hidden' practice was pursued further in Kitchener, Kirkpatrick, & Whipp (2000) research into the impact of New Public Management on supervision

within residential care. Their findings suggest that, despite the aim of achieving tighter constraints on professional autonomy, 'practice remains largely beyond the gaze of managers and their new bureaucratic control strategies' (p. 224). Nevertheless, if the managerial function dominates and distorts the supervision agenda, there is a risk that critical areas of practice remain invisible. In particular, the less tangible and more nuanced aspects including the emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012; Ingram, 2015) involved in working alongside people who use services and other professionals may be neglected, with significant consequences for practitioners, for the organisations in which they work, and for people who need support (Ofsted, 2012).

A renewed focus on supervision has seen heightened recognition of the training needs of supervisors. The recommendations of the Social Work Task Force (2009) included dedicated training programmes for first-line managers and the 'Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England and Supervision Framework' (Social Work Reform Board, 2012, p. 6) stipulates that regular training should be provided for supervisors. Both in children's and adult services, there is acknowledgment of the pivotal function of high-quality supervision 'in supporting frontline social workers to think through the issues, dilemmas and the best interventions and approaches to different people's situations' (Department of Health, 2016, p. 23). In its guidance document on clinical supervision responding to recommendations from the Winterbourne View Serious Case Review (Flynn & Citarella, 2012), the Care Quality Commission (CQC, 2013, p. 8) emphasised that 'supervisors should be adequately trained, experienced and supported to perform their role', contrasting starkly with an implicit assumption that supervision is learnt by osmosis (Davys & Beddoe, 2010). Practice remains inconsistent, however, with indications that many new supervisors still take up their role with minimal preparation and reliant, to a large degree, on their own experience as a supervisee (Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Cousins, 2010; Hair, 2013; White, 2015).

Internationally, there are varying standards and training requirements for supervision. Egan (2012) contrasts limited supervision training options in Australia with practice in New Zealand, where accredited programmes are available at certificate and diploma level. Beddoe (2012), however, highlights that formal training is not a requirement in either country despite professional supervision being a mandated requirement. Within the UK, different professional regulatory bodies have introduced registration requirements for specific roles, for example, supervisors in housing support services (SSSC, 2014), which include minimum qualifications but these are not consistent across the separate jurisdictions.

In a systematic literature review, Mor Barak et al. (2009) identified three key elements in supervision linked to beneficial worker outcomes – task assistance, social and emotional support, and supervisory interpersonal interaction – and recommended training specifically focused on these areas. The importance of supervisory training that supports reflective practice is widely recognised, particularly in the context of managerial constraints that have tipped the balance of functions within supervision towards case review and risk management (Beddoe, 2010; Lawler, 2015; Noble & Irwin, 2009; Peach & Horner, 2007). For supervisors who are also line managers, there is a constant challenge in managing the tensions between organisational and professional agendas (Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens, & Sharpe, 2015; Pack, 2015) and Hair (2013) has suggested that training delivered by external bodies, rather than in the workplace, may help to counterbalance the dominance of procedural models.

The provision of supervision training remains patchy across the workforce and there is little evidence to suggest that staff stepping into a first-line management post feel well prepared for their supervisory role. The transition from practitioner to supervisor is managed differently across professions but a significant shift in professional identity is a common theme (Gilmore, 2010; Patterson, 2015; White, 2009). Stoner and Stoner's (2013) description of moving from a 'doer role' to a 'leader role' is pertinent to the experience of newly promoted supervisors who are confident in their practice skills but not yet assured of their expertise as managers. This transition from 'individual performer to managing performance through people' (Stoner & Stoner, 2013, p. 8) requires a stepping back and holding back; enabling staff to develop appropriate professional autonomy rather than fostering

dependency. Developmental models have their limitations, but nevertheless offer useful insight into the journey from novice to expert (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, cited in Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011) for both practitioners and supervisors. Needing to provide answers and being drawn into the minutiae of casework frequently marks the early stages of being a supervisor. There is a need to prove one's worth and it is a tall order, therefore 'to create a supervisory setting in which uncertainty, ignorance and feelings of incompetence can be tolerated and discussed in a culture quite different from the one of "being supposed to know" (Mollon, 1989, quoted in Scaife, 2001, p. 41).

Davys and Beddoe (2008) differentiate two distinct tasks for the new supervisor. One is the translation of direct practice skills into supervision practice requiring the ability to work with service users at 'arms-length'. Second is the facilitation of learning and critical reflection; ensuring that this sits at the heart of the supervisory process regardless of competing pressures and organisational demands. There are inherent tensions between the developmental and accountability aspects of supervision and it is the supervisor's responsibility both to oversee professional standards and to foster a creative learning environment (Carroll, 2009). It can be argued that a third critical task is to ensure that the person on the receiving end of services retains a central position within supervision. This is not to contradict the importance of a detached (arms-length) perspective but to be mindful also of the missing presence in each supervision session.

There is broad recognition of an evidence gap in relation to the impact of supervision on outcomes for people using services (Beddoe, Karvinen-Niinikoski, Ruch, & Tsui, 2015; Carpenter, Webb, & Bostock, 2013; Carpenter et al., 2012). While cautious assumptions can be made about indirect benefits, for example, staff morale and worker continuity, arising from improved retention, self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Kearns & McArdle, 2012), there are no grounds for professional complacency about the value of supervision. The risk of staff needs taking precedence is not a new concern (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997) and outcomes-focused supervision (Johnstone & Miller, 2010; Morrison & Wonnacott, 2010) represents a committed effort to focus on what makes a difference to the lives of service users without negating the significance of staff support and well-being for safe, sustainable practice (Brechin, Walmsley, Katz, & Peace, 1998). Practical strategies for keeping the person receiving support at the centre of supervision include the symbolic 'empty chair', role playing and questioning the missing voices in the room.

With some exceptions (Beddoe & Davys, 2016; Wonnacott, 2014), the contribution of formal learning opportunities to supervisory development, both for those new to the role and others with more extensive experience, is under-explored. This paper utilises examples drawn from an established and accredited professional supervision course to identify and reflect upon how support and challenge within a collaborative learning experience can shape professionals' understanding of their role and confidence to enact it.

Post-qualifying module in professional supervision

This paper is informed by our experience of delivering an accredited module in professional supervision as part of a post-qualifying award for managers in social services. The certificate qualification is approved by the professional regulatory body, Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), as an approved award for registered managers and supervisors and is mapped against the National Occupational Standards (NOS) Leadership and Management for Care Services. The course has been delivered over the past eight years with continuous review to keep pace with evolving theory and contemporary practice. It is a 20 credit module (notional equivalent of 200 student hours) and can be studied at either Level 10 (Graduate) or Level 11 (Postgraduate) of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF, 2012). Participants engage in direct teaching, structured learning activities and observed supervision practice within their workplace. At the end of the taught module, they submit a reflective assignment incorporating feedback from the observer who is usually their line manager or a learning and development colleague. The aim of the observed sessions is to make practice visible, and enable explicit linkage between theory and

practice by encouraging exploration of how the different 'functions' of supervision translate into direct interaction with supervisees.

Over 250 social services managers and supervisors have completed the course since 2009. The module is offered both to specialist groups, that is, supervisors working in child welfare and protection, and to mixed cohorts comprising managers from adult health and social care, criminal justice social work and children's services. It is usual for the group to include staff from third-sector organisations alongside statutory agencies and for health and allied health professionals to be represented as well as social workers. Course participants span fieldwork managers, supervisors from residential care and day services, home care and reablement managers, staff working in secondary settings including hospitals and prison services. While the majority are based in the south or central belt of Scotland, the geographical spread has encompassed over 20 of the 32 Scottish local authorities and represents both urban and rural work settings. The diversity of professional discipline, work role, locality and specialism is matched by wide-ranging experience and levels of responsibility. Newly promoted supervisors participate alongside experienced first-line and middle managers, and cohorts include senior practitioners and practice educators who hold a supervisory remit but no formal line management responsibility. As part of the university's formal quality assurance processes, the module is reviewed on an annual basis and feedback is sought from agency partners as well as students. In this paper, we have sought to draw out key themes that reflect the impact of the course on participants and its contribution to their supervisory practice. We look at five specific areas:

- How diversity amongst participants enhances their appreciation of different approaches to supervision;
- How the culture of supervision connects to practitioners' engagement with people using services;
- The significance of supervision as a quiet space for reflection which can hold its own alongside competing demands and managerial priorities;
- The interdependence of emotional awareness and theoretical understanding within 'thoughtful practice';
- Paying attention to the 'empty chair' or the unheard voice within supervision.

Appreciating difference

Looking out over a room of unfamiliar faces, there is a sense of both anticipation and trepidation. Awareness of the rich diversity of experience represented in the group is tempered by concern that it may not be possible to bridge the differences and make this a constructive learning opportunity for all participants. Those who have been supervising staff (or students) for years may be frustrated by theory that is already familiar while others will feel overwhelmed if expected to assimilate new material too quickly. Furthermore, there are anxieties about the range of expertise and status within the room. A senior manager sits alongside someone appointed to their first management post barely a month ago and it is hard to know what commonality they will discover. The majority of the group have a social work or social care background making it easy to lapse into jargon that is non-inclusive and marginalises colleagues from health or allied health professions (Davys & Beddoe, 2008). And there are yet more layers and unspoken assumptions. Staff from statutory agencies and their voluntary sector counterparts are well versed in partnership working but do not necessarily experience this as a level playing field (Sinclair & Lindsay, 2008). When managers from the independent sector join the mix, there is yet more scope for stereotyping to cause rifts or for someone to feel isolated within the larger group. Even within the same sector there are status differentials including the distance between fieldwork managers and those working in residential settings, or the subtle ways in which the value accorded to different groups of service users rubs off on those who work with them.

The flip side of such diversity is the potential it offers for new insight and shifting perspectives. At the start of a new course, it is helpful to explicitly acknowledge participants' experience as a valuable resource for collaborative learning and also to be open about the strengths and limitations of one's own professional background. The aim is to establish a culture of mutuality but without denying the power invested in the role of teacher and assessor. When the group is established and trust has begun to develop, it becomes easier to make use of the breadth of information held within the room, drawing on the expertise and practice wisdom of individual students. A relevant example concerns supervision and attachment styles (Morrison, 2005), an area of theory in which staff in children's services are well versed but, for many working in adult health and social care, it may be a dim echo from their professional training. Pairing students up is a productive way of exploring the topic without anyone feeling undermined by lack of expertise. Those more familiar with attachment theory are invited to make sense of this with someone else and to put into words how it informs their practice. Those for whom this is new territory can ask questions and test out their understanding within the safe bounds of a one-to-one conversation.

At times it is valuable to challenge group assumptions such as the unspoken hierarchies within professional groupings (Lymbery, 2006). One example of this was in a cohort that included two managers from domiciliary care whose experience and training was markedly different from other participants who were fieldwork managers and professionally qualified social workers. While no formal ranking existed there was, nonetheless, an implicit sense that the intense demands of high-risk child protection exceeded the pressures in any other service. Creating space for the home care managers to describe their role and the challenges they faced supervising large numbers of staff, many of whom were unqualified and working with vulnerable and isolated older people, changed people's perceptions more effectively than any structured teaching input. In his final assignment one of the other managers reflected back on how humbled he had felt after listening to their experience.

Mirroring practice

The module is based on adult learning principles with explicit acknowledgment of the breadth of expertise brought to the course by participants. Sharing diverse perspectives and face-to-face dialogue with peers is consistently affirmed as an invaluable component of the taught module, which enriches the learning environment in both planned and unexpected ways. An example of the latter arose when a recent cohort was discussing the role supervision contracts play in underpinning supervisory relationships, drawing on Morrison's (2005) analogy of a 'three legged stool' representing the administrative, professional and psychological dimensions of a working agreement.

A collaborative learning agreement is integral to the module, drawn up at the start of each course and effectively representing the ground rules for engagement. It is an important way of ensuring that the learning environment feels like a safe space and that participants have confidence that the space will be *held*.

> What are the things that will help to make this a constructive learning experience for you?
>
> What do you think you can contribute to make this a supportive and stimulating learning environment for everyone?
>
> What are your expectations of your peers on the course?

Questions such as these aim to promote a positive culture applicable both to direct teaching and online dialogue. Invariably, there is common ground when groups identify fundamental principles of respect, listening, time-keeping, etc. and it is rare for the importance of feeling safe to acknowledge ignorance or uncertainty not to be included. The flip chart summary serves as tangible reminder of what has been collectively agreed and is re-visited during teaching sessions as appropriate. On this occasion, an experienced manager in the group pointed to the learning agreement and highlighted two comments on it: 'confidentiality' and 'there is no such thing as a stupid question', before

proceeding to question the value of supervision contracts. His challenge to peers was whether 'anyone actually uses these?', as he identified the potential gap between policy and practice, rhetoric and reality, which is familiar to many. In response, it became evident that working practice amongst this group of supervisors was variable, but that supervision agreements were used intermittently. Another manager then reflected on the way in which the group learning agreement had been consciously brought to the fore before the query was voiced. Its purpose had served as a safety net for risk-taking and expressing doubt. She wondered aloud whether supervision contracts might fulfil a similar function within supervisory relationships, by making explicit the principles underpinning a safe holding environment (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Northouse, 2016; Winnicott, 1973). After a brief silence, there were nods and laughter around the room, as the original contributor acknowledged a volte-face about what formal supervision agreements might offer. Evaluating the module some months later, the significance of this experiential learning stood out for its impact on his practice.

Holding open a reflective space

Munro (2011, p. 75) highlighted that 'the conundrum facing managers is that the quick way of achieving a minimum of practice is through rule and process driven practice, but this creates obstacles to the development of higher levels of practice'. In response to anxieties that the reflective space which supervision can provide is being diminished, and that one-way supervisors are managing risk is by being increasingly directive, essentially telling practitioners what to do, action learning sets offer an alternative approach and a valuable model of structured reflection. The process invites participants to engage in active listening, critical thinking and emotional authenticity but it requires them to refrain from offering solutions or trying to 'fix' someone else's problem.

It is this holding back from giving advice that is of particular value to participants' development as supervisors. The discipline of action learning serves as reminder that front-line practitioners are often best placed to generate solutions to the challenges they face (Revans, 1980), and that professional capability will be enhanced if managers can gauge when to intervene and when to stand back. It is common for new supervisors to feel they should have all the answers and that 'not-knowing' is a sign of incompetence. This belongs to the transition journey and the shift from 'doer role' to 'leader role' (Stoner & Stoner, 2013) where the task of the manager is to support the development of others. Established supervisors can also adopt a problem-solving approach, colluding with or fostering dependency either because it is gratifying to be appreciated or because it is so much quicker, in the short-term, to tell someone what to do than to let them try out different ideas, learn from mistakes and find their own way forward. Clearly, there are situations where directive advice is essential but many course participants have recognised how this can become an habitual response closing down other options and limiting supervisees' autonomy.

Valuing head and heart

Action learning affirms the feeling dimension of supervision practice, grounding this in tangible experience rather than relying on theoretical discussion alone. Effective supervision acts as a container for the emotions and anxieties provoked by direct work with individuals' pain, loss and vulnerability, and the heightened risks that can ensue if this is neglected are well documented (Cooper, Hetherington, & Katz, 2003; Ferguson, 2011; Gibbs, 2001; Rushton & Nathan, 1996). Within an action learning set, one strives for 'connected knowing' (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986): an integration of thinking and feeling, which recognises that deep levels of understanding depend on human relationship. One way in which this is manifest is in the first stage of responding after a group member has presented an issue to their peers. Before any questions are raised or points clarified, each member of the listening circle identifies the feeling that has been evoked as they focused on the presenter's issue. This is feedback that is powerful and immediate. It is not about

sense-making or deep analysis and indeed some, who stray into lengthier verbal accounts, need gentle reminder to simply be present with their emotion.

In supervision triad work, participants are also asked to engage with their whole being and, while mindful of their professional role, to respond authentically to the conversation that evolves. Role play is stimulating for some and threatening for others but provides a potent opportunity to practise supervision skills in a safe space. Each triad includes an observer sitting slightly apart from the interaction between supervisor and supervisee and participants take a turn in all of the roles. The tutor acts as further observer moving round the different triads and noting common themes or issues to explore. In a recent cohort, it became apparent that one group were not participating in the experiential activity. They were talking *about* supervision issues rather than entering *into* supervision dialogue. Initially, it was not obvious whether they had misunderstood the task or were rejecting the role play activity, but gradually, it became clearer that one of the triad was unable to let go of a detached 'third person' voice and enter more deeply into the emotional content of practice. Rather than resistance, it felt like some physical obstacle stood in the way of their full engagement and talking about what the activity involved only accentuated the difficulty. The shift came when the tutor rested her hand on the participant's shoulder while speaking the 'I' that proved so elusive. Holding that position for a few moments, something was freed up which enabled the individual to talk from inside their own experience rather than distanced from it.

Holding the person in mind

There is scope within supervision for more creative experiential work but even a symbolic image can have powerful impact. The concept of three parties involved in supervision is represented as a simple triangle by Hughes and Pengelly (1997). While this does not encompass the wider organisational and societal context it focuses attention on the person, be they adult or child, who is not present in the room but whose interests and well-being should be kept central. The concept of an 'empty chair' is used within teaching as another way of representing the missing voice of the service user. For some people an actual chair may be helpful, offering the possibility of shifting position to sit in a different place and imagine the world through different eyes. But even without a physical chair, it serves as reminder that both supervisor and supervisee need to hold the person in mind and acknowledge a perspective that may be at odds with the professional one.

Carroll (2009, p. 217) views supervision as a space for transformational learning, recommending that each session close with the words 'What have you learned from the past hour here in supervision? What two or three learnings are you taking away with you?'. Within the course we borrow from Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) concern for shared supervisory learning, but try to include awareness of what this means for those on the receiving end of services.

> What have we learned that neither of us knew before?
>
> What have we learned that we could not have learned on our own?
>
> What new capability have we generated and what difference will that make for the people we are working with? (adapted from Hawkins & Shohet, 2012, p. 239)

Conclusion

Supervision is occupying the minds of policy-makers, managers and academics across the globe and there are signs that the pendulum may be swinging back from procedural models to appreciation of more reflective approaches. New challenges are emerging with the expansion of integrated services, issues of cultural competence and renewed focus on the impact of supervision on outcomes for people using services. Despite such complexity, the quality and availability of training for supervisors

remains inconsistent including lack of preparation or developmental opportunities for many stepping into their first supervisory position.

Within this paper, we have explored some of the learning points from a post-qualifying module in professional supervision, identifying both intended and unanticipated benefits, and highlighting the contribution of an accredited training course to participants' confidence and competence in their supervisory practice. Newly promoted supervisors gain a theoretical foundation to complement their previous experience as supervisees while established managers value the opportunity to update their knowledge and question habitual ways of 'being and doing' in the supervisory role. Time and again, feedback from course participants emphasises the transforming insight of a supervision triangle rather than dyadic relationship, and the value of this in keeping a clear focus on the child or adult whose interests are at stake.

There is scope for further evaluation of the impact of supervision training. Currently, feedback is formally gathered from participants at the end of the taught module but, to date, there has been limited follow-up to investigate what difference the learning has made over time. The perspective of supervisees is missing, as are the voices of service users. Nevertheless, the sustained level of interest in the training offered and the strong commitment to high supervision standards demonstrated by participants suggests that a structured and collaborative learning experience makes a worthwhile contribution to their professional development, enhancing their confidence and capability in supervising others.

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Notes on contributors

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