Practice
Tool

PSDP—Resources and Tools:

A 3D model – forms of support for social workers

Introduction

This learning tool is based on ideas presented in Wilkins D (2017) 'Does reflective supervision have a future in English local authority and family social work'? *Journal of Children's Services* 12 (2-3) 164-173.

Social workers don't *need* supervision, they *need* effective support

The purpose of this learning tool is to argue that, as we increasingly recognise the importance of good supervision, we need to be careful not to place unreasonable expectations on the shoulders of practice supervisors. From my experience of researching supervision over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to observe and work with many excellent and skilled supervisors. Yet one cannot fail to notice how difficult it is to provide consistently good supervision, having to keep in mind the different developmental and professional needs of maybe half a dozen workers, while keeping abreast of how their work is going with at least 60 to 70 children (assuming a case load of around 10), and, in reality, often many more.

This tool is therefore intended as a think piece and prompt to consider what expectations we place upon practice supervisions, whether these are reasonable expectations and how else we might provide support for social workers without over-burdening supervision.

Background

Supervision is widely considered to be a keystone of good practice. But consensus is not the same as an evidence base (Forrester et al, 2019).

What is undoubtedly true is that social workers need good support if they are to work effectively with families. Social workers who are over-worked and provided with insufficient resources will sometimes still manage to achieve good things with families and for children, but often at the expense of their own wellbeing and only for a relatively short period of time before becoming overwhelmed.

If you were developing a new service from scratch, you would certainly want to ensure that social workers, and others, were given manageable workloads, a range of easily-accessible resources and a supportive yet challenging environment. As part of this new service, with the proverbial blank sheet of paper, what kind of support would you aim to put in place and how would you go about providing it?

You may conclude that while one-to-one supervision is important, it would be unreasonable to expect practice supervisors alone to meet the diverse needs of practitioners. To do so would be like believing that the only thing families in need require is the help of a social worker, as opposed to a social worker, a health visitor, a good school, decent housing, a reliable basic income, and so on.

Instead, you might consider how to provide effective support in a variety of ways. As such, this learning tool asks you to think about supervision not as a stand-alone activity to be improved but as one (albeit an important) part of a much wider system of support.

Introducing the 3D model – forms of support for social workers

Figure 1 presented below provides a way of thinking about how support might be provided to meet various different needs. In this case, for management oversight and professional and emotional support. Most (if not all) people will be familiar with 2D graphs, with an x and y-axis. The cube in figure 1 is a 2D graph stretched into a third dimension, which allows for an additional z-axis.

On the cube, the x-axis represents professional support (including analysis, critical thinking and decision-making), the y-axis represents emotional support (including managing stress and talking about the personal impact of the work) and the z-axis represents management oversight (including adherence to professional standards, timekeeping, and working to local policies).

Figure 1. A 3D model of various kinds of supervision and how they might provide support in different ways for workers.
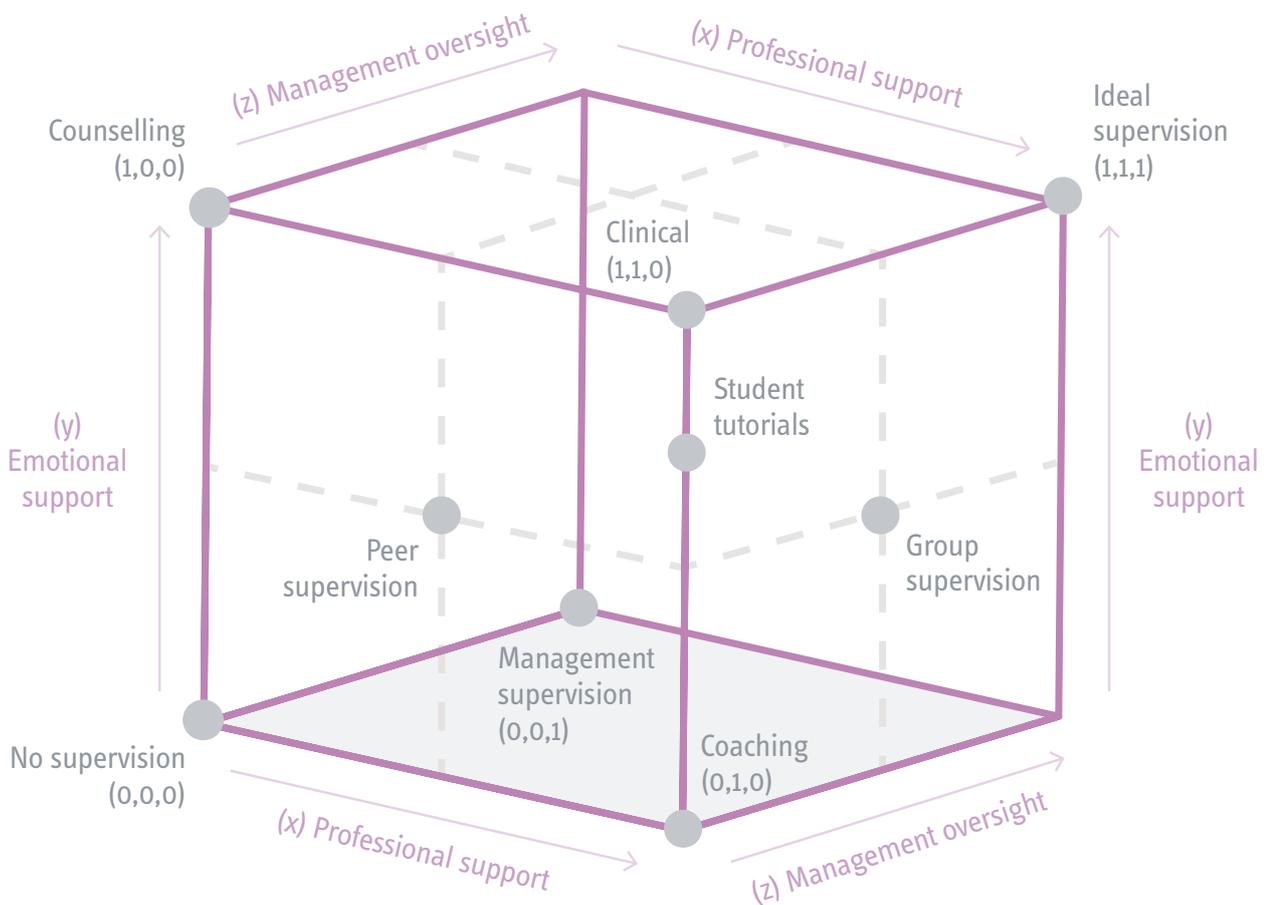
An ideal type of one-to-one supervision might provide all these forms of support all of the time for every worker (seen at the top right of the cube). Yet, based on the studies of supervision I have been involved in, it is my view that this form of supervision only really exists as a kind of Platonic ideal, and hardly ever in practice (at least, not consistently so).

This is emphatically not a criticism about the quality of individual supervisors, who are very often exceptionally committed, experienced and skillful. It is instead a recognition of a) the complexity of providing support for increasingly diverse teams of social workers with varying needs, in relation to potentially hundreds of children and b) the importance of asking not how effective is the supervisor at supporting good practice but how effective is the system as a whole.

With that in mind, what other forms of support might be provided to meet these three support needs? The ones I have listed on the cube are not supposed to be exhaustive. And it might be that we could also use other labels for the three axes, too. But in this example, we can see how emotional support can also be provided via counselling, group supervision and peer supervision. And how professional support can be provided by coaching, peer supervision, group supervision, student tutorials and clinical supervision. And how management oversight can be provided by group supervision. So far, all of these different forms of support are still variations of supervision (broadly considered).

In figure 2, a greater variety of support is suggested. By starting with a consideration of need, we can ask whether or not we provide enough one-to-one supervision, and whether or not it is of sufficient quality. But what are the support needs of the workforce and in what different ways can we meet those needs? One-to-one supervision will always play an important part, but the 'problem' of why supervision is not always as effective as we might like could actually be solved (at least in part) by focusing less, not more, on supervision.

Figure 2. A 3D model of various kinds of activity and how they might provide support in different ways for workers.
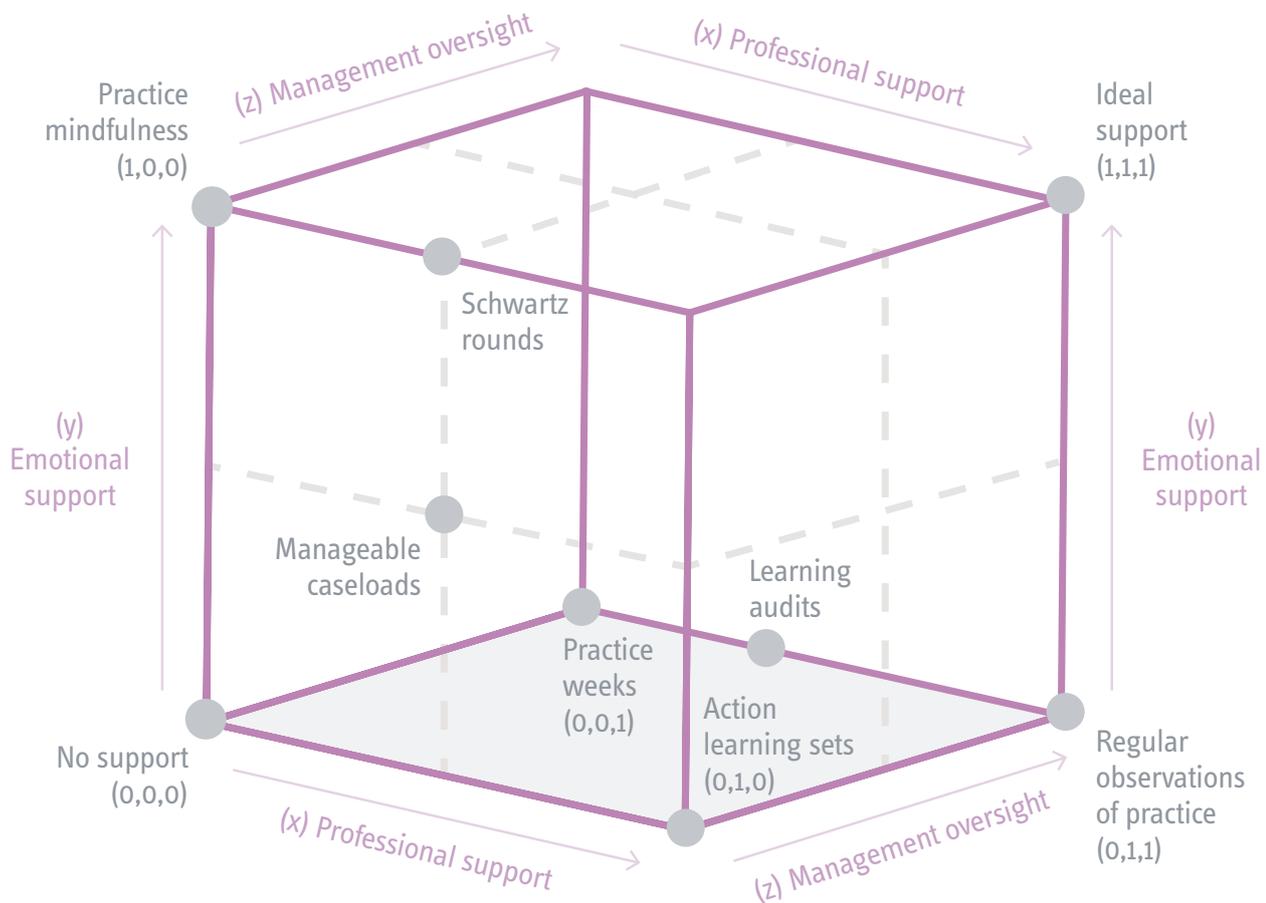
For example, emotional support might be provided via worker mindfulness, attendance at Schwartz rounds and by ensuring manageable workloads. For professional support, workers could attend action learning sets and receive feedback based on regular observations of their practice. Additionally, there may be members of minority groups such as LGBT practitioners or black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women who would value targeted support networks or mentoring. Management oversight could be provided via practice weeks and learning audits.

Questions to consider:

1. What kinds of support do social workers need to work effectively with families? Figures 1 and 2 suggest they need emotional, professional and managerial support. Can you identify how these forms of support are currently provided for within your own team or organisation? What other kinds of support might workers need besides these? What other types of support might be of value in the context of an increasingly diverse social work workforce?

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2. Thinking about one-to-one supervision within your organisation, what needs are met most effectively through this activity? What needs are more often overlooked, if any?

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3. Thinking about figures 1 and 2. Can you identify anything that might help you support social workers?

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4. What other things might help, particularly to address any areas of unmet or poorly-supported need (thinking about individual supervision or how emotional, professional or managerial support to work effectively with families occurs within your organisation)?

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5. Has anything occurred to you from considering the ideas presented in this learning tool? Is there anything you are going to change about individual supervision, or about other forms of support within your team or wider organisation?

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Other ways you can use this tool

You may find it useful to discuss these ideas with the staff you supervise (either individually or as a group) to harness their ideas about the different ways in which emotional, professional or managerial support and opportunities to discuss practice with children and families can be found (or developed) within your team or the wider organisation.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

Further reading

You can read more about the ideas presented in this learning tool in the full paper (pay wall).

Wilkins D (2017) 'Does reflective supervision have a future in English local authority and family social work'? *Journal of Children's Services* 12 (2-3) 164-173.

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