



PSDP—Resources and Tools: The holistic containment wheel

Introduction

This learning tool invites you as a practice supervisor to reflect on how you can help to create an environment that provides 'holistic containment' for social workers. The tool provides a brief summary of the concept of holistic containment, and introduces a model of how this can be applied to the role of the practice supervisor.

The holistic containment wheel consists of twelve segments. Some explanatory comments about each segment are given and then questions are posed that invite you to reflect on your experience and work as a practice supervisor in that area.

Ruch (2007) undertook research in what she calls 'holistic reflective practice', i.e. practice that integrates technical with personal and experiential knowledge, and that is concerned with sense-making as well as identifying practical strategies to manage social work situations. In order to create the conditions that support holistic reflective practice, Ruch suggests that social work organisations need to provide 'holistic containment', which brings together three elements:

Emotional containment

Epistemological containment

Organisational containment

Emotional containment

Recognises the significance of secure individual and group relationships, whether they be between peers, peers and managers, or others, that provide space for emotions to be recognised and processed.

Epistemological containment

Refers to the capacity of the organisation to enable practitioners to integrate multiple forms of technical, process and ethical knowledge into their reflections on practice.

Organisational containment

Requires organisational, professional and managerial clarity and thoughtful, consistent managerial relationships.

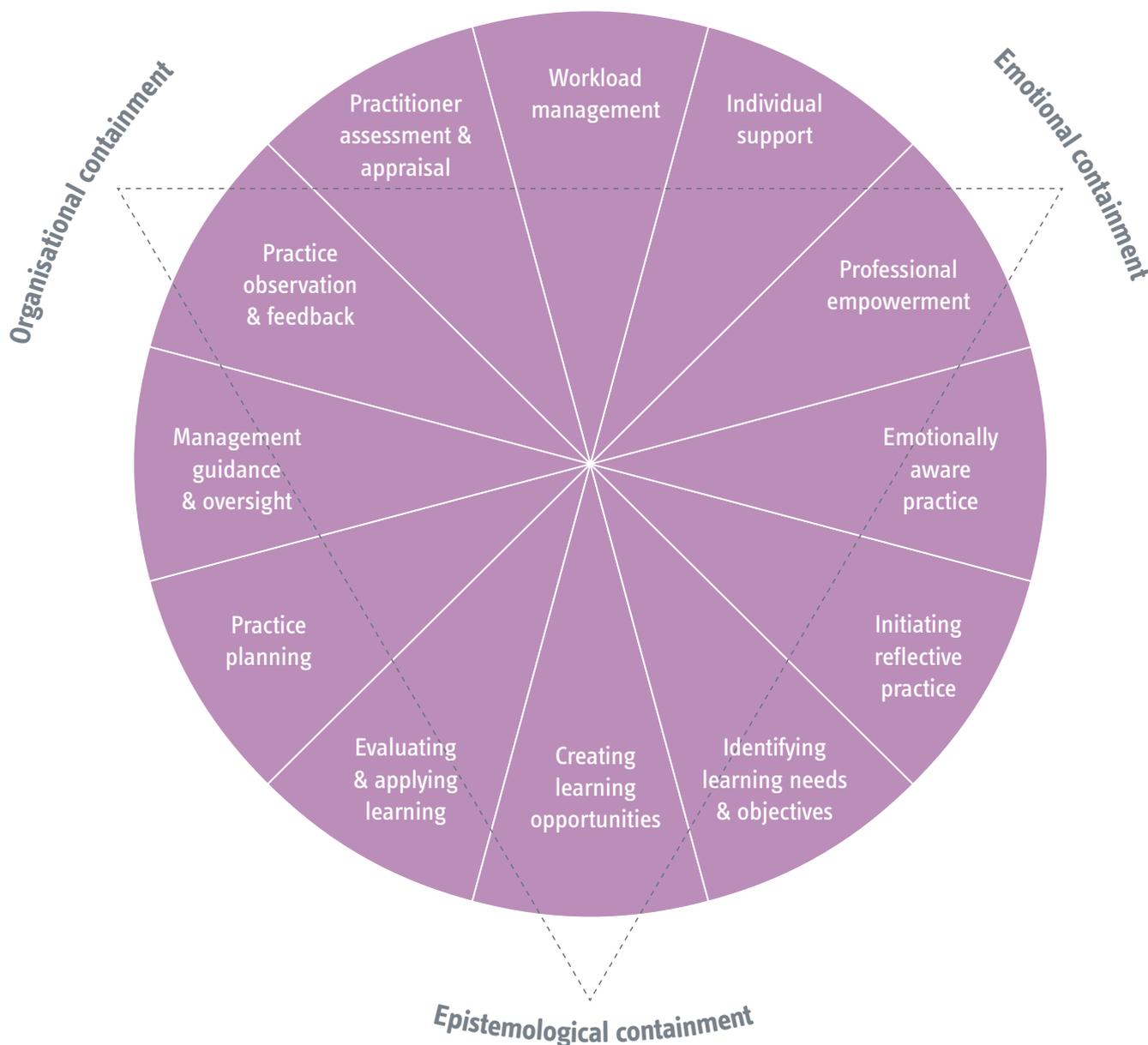
When all three are present in an organisation there is holistic containment, which, Ruch argues, provides the most fruitful environment for supervisors to support holistic reflective practice.

Reflection

Think about your place of work. What examples of emotional, epistemological and organisational containment can you identify?

Where are the gaps?

The holistic containment wheel



The holistic containment wheel represents different components of the practice supervisor role mapped against Ruch's concept of holistic containment.

Although these segments are differentiated, they are not discrete tasks. Rather, they are components of a continuous process. Many supervision sessions weave different segments together almost simultaneously.

However, in using the model to reflect on your supervision practice, it may be helpful to consciously progress through the wheel, or to focus on one segment in more detail.

In any one supervision session, the balance between the different components is contingent on the capabilities of the practice supervisor and practitioner, their relationship with and knowledge of each other, individual learning styles and career trajectories, and the practice context and situation. For all practice supervisors the welfare and safety of children and families is the ultimate priority. Where this is compromised, practice supervisors may have to recommend that the practitioner is not meeting required standards or, in extreme situations, ‘whistle blow’.

Underpinning core capabilities

Some core capabilities underpin each segment. Research indicates the importance of a trusting relationship between practice supervisor and practitioner (Carpenter 2012). Practice supervisors can promote this through providing, as far as possible, a regular and protected space for supervision sessions.

The practice supervisor’s ability to be assertive and to establish appropriate boundaries, combined with an openness to practitioner feedback, are vital. Skills of negotiating and using supervision agreements, structuring supervision sessions, providing constructive feedback, and accurate and timely recording are also necessary.

Summary information follows, which gives you a brief description of each segment of the containment wheel, followed by some

reflective questions for you to consider. You might want to work through each of these in order, or pick those segments of the wheel which are most meaningful to you.

Workload management

This refers to the work of the practice supervisor in allocating, or monitoring the allocation of, appropriate work. It involves making judgements about the volume, level and complexity of work being undertaken by the practitioner in line with national and local norms and workload management systems.

The practice supervisor has responsibilities to assess whether a duty of care towards the practitioner’s health, safety and welfare is being exercised (Acas 2012). The practice supervisor also has a wider role in advocating for practitioners where they consider that unreasonable demands and unnecessary bureaucracy are being placed upon them.

Reflection

- > What are the organisation’s expectations for a practitioner’s workload in this stage and role?
- > Is the practitioner’s workload appropriate, given their availability, existing or potential capabilities, current emotional resilience, and development needs?
- > What do I need to feedback to the organisation about the workload practitioners are expected to take on?

Individual support

Individual support means treating the practitioner as an individual, being aware of their life circumstances and responding compassionately to life events such as illness, bereavement and pregnancy.

Practice supervisors need to be curious about how their and their practitioners' respective social locations influence their work together, ensure that duties under equality legislation are met, facilitate reasonable adjustments for practitioners with disabilities, and respond effectively to reports of bullying.

Many life experiences enhance our practice, but sometimes what Egan (2007) calls our 'shadow side' gets in the way of helping. Practice supervisors need to be able to explore practitioners' particular strengths and vulnerabilities, and the relationship of these to their professional practice, without turning professional development sessions into therapy. Some situations may necessitate advising practitioners to use resources such as occupational health or counselling.

Reflection

- > What are the practitioner's current personal circumstances, resources and needs?
- > What particular strengths and vulnerabilities does this individual practitioner bring to social work, given what you know about their life experiences?
- > What responsibilities under equalities and related legislation do you and the organisation have towards this practitioner?
- > How do your respective life experiences, social identities and experiences of oppression or privilege impact on your relationship and your work together as supervisor and supervisee?

Professional empowerment

This involves supporting the practitioner's self-leadership, long term career development and their professional leadership capability. It requires understanding of the particular barriers that groups of staff may face because of their race, sex, or other characteristics, and collaboratively devising strategies to overcome them.

This could include acting as a mentor, or assisting practitioners to find other mentors (these might be experts by experience, colleagues, managers, or other professionals), and encouraging participation in professional communities of practice relating to their areas of interest.

Reflection

- > What are the practitioner's strengths, passions and ambitions in social work?
- > What opportunities and resources are available within and beyond the organisation to help them develop and achieve these?
- > How far is the organisational hierarchy representative of your practitioner workforce?
- > Do there appear to be any barriers or obstacles faced by people who share this practitioner's characteristics?
- > What strategies can be put in place to overcome any barriers that you have identified?

Emotionally aware practice

Emotionally aware practice entails heightening practitioners' awareness of their emotional responses to, and relationships with, children and families and their network, including family members and other professionals, and the meaning of this for their work with them (Howe 2008).

It enables practitioners to express their feelings and reflect on their own personal and professional values, and how these relate to their work with children and families. The practice supervisor has to integrate emotional support to the practitioner with attention to the needs and welfare of children and families, enhancing empathy but not over-identification.

Depending on both of your frames of reference you could use psychodynamic concepts such as projection, transference, counter transference or containment, systemic theory, or theories of anti-oppressive practice to make sense of this practitioner's responses to the situation they are faced with.

Reflection

- > How far is this practitioner able to recognise and reflect on their relationships and emotional responses to the children and families they work with?
- > How can you best open up conversations with this practitioner about their emotional responses to, or value judgements about, these children and their families?
- > What are the most appropriate conceptual frameworks for you to speak about feelings and relationships?
- > What can you learn about the children and families through these conversations?

Initiating reflective practice

This involves practice supervisors and practitioners agreeing which aspects of practice they will reflect on, and how. This involves a communicative style that incorporates doing, thinking and feeling and, where appropriate, use of specific tools such as critical incident analysis (Bruce 2013).

The practice supervisor uses listening and questioning skills to enable practitioners to analyse a situation, and to critically examine the assumptions and hypotheses they bring to it. The practitioner is helped to integrate existing sources of knowledge and be curious about what perspectives and evidence are missing. Together, they identify the conceptual and practice frameworks that the practitioner needs in order to take the work forward.

Reflection

- > What aspects of practice, with which children and families, would it be most useful to reflect on and why?
- > What tools could you use for your reflective process?
- > Which conceptual and practice frameworks are the practitioner using to reflect on the situations they work with? Are there any gaps?
- > What does the practitioner need to know and be able to do in order to take the work forward?

Identifying learning needs and objectives

This segment involves enabling practitioners to evaluate their existing practice capabilities and compare these with the work-related needs that have been established.

The practice supervisor helps practitioners to recognise tacit or partial knowledge and potentially transferable skills, as well as to draw out general learning needs and refine these into more specific objectives.

The practice supervisor encourages practitioners to do this for themselves but appreciates that they will be at different stages. In some instances it will be necessary to be more directive and to make suggestions. At other times just listening or asking open questions will be sufficient.

Reflection

- > How can you help the practitioner identify their existing capabilities and transfer these to a new situation?
- > What gaps does the practitioner identify?
- > Do you agree with this or should you make additions or changes?
- > How can we specify in more detail the practitioner's learning objective?

Creating learning opportunities

Creating learning opportunities requires the practice supervisor to be aware of different resources that could meet agreed learning objectives. These might include reading or research appraisal, shadowing, coaching or mentoring, using communities of practice to investigate different approaches, and training courses and formally accredited programmes.

In an era of diminishing funds for CPD (continuing professional development), creativity and pragmatism are needed in fashioning a CPD plan that fits with a practitioner's learning preferences.

At times it is possible to provide direct teaching within a practice development session. For instance, a practice supervisor could support a practitioner to investigate relevant research studies by considering potential sources or search terms, or roleplay to demonstrate a particular technique or approach.

Reflection

- > How can I use our supervision sessions to support the practitioner to meet these learning objectives?
- > What other learning resources are available to support the practitioner's learning?

Evaluating and applying learning

Following the CPD activities, the practice supervisor assists practitioners by evaluating and integrating their learning. They review what practitioners have learned and its relevance for the work, and whether there are continuing gaps in their knowledge and skills.

The practice supervisor facilitates practitioners to think critically about whether their previous assumptions have been challenged, what new ethical or social justice issues arise from their learning, and in what ways they are re-evaluating their approach to their work. They also consider how practitioners could disseminate what they have learned within the organisation and across other professional networks.

Reflection

- > What has the practitioner learned?
- > How can I support the practitioner to think critically about what they have learned and integrate this into their practice?
- > How could the practitioner share their learning with others?

Practice planning

In this segment the focus moves onto establishing goals and making plans for work with children and families.

Here, information from a range of sources are brought together and evaluated, including standardised assessment tools such as risk assessments or observations of practice, insights from critical reflection, learning from CPD activities, relevant research findings, legal requirements and policy directives, and the stories and preferences of children, families, carers or professionals.

The practice supervisor and practitioner review previous or generate new hypotheses about the situation, as well as strategies to test them out. Ethical issues and options are weighed up and social, economic and diversity factors examined.

The practice supervisor and practitioner make judgements about what kind of decisions and inputs are needed: collaborative planning, support or therapeutic work, authoritative intervention, determination of resource eligibility and so on. Concrete decisions are taken and specific plans with action steps are made.

Reflection

- > What does the practitioner think needs to happen next for the child and their family?
- > What specific risk factors, needs or strengths have they identified?
- > Taking into account what you know about the child and family, how far do you agree with the practitioner's view of the situation?
- > How will you challenge any disagreements in a way that encourages the practitioner's learning and development?
- > What goals for the child and their family have you identified?
- > How can you support the practitioner to work collaboratively with the child and their family towards achieving these goals?

Management oversight and guidance

This all too often dominates standard line management supervision, but remains an essential component. It involves scrutiny of whether or not previously agreed social work decisions are being implemented, specific actions are completed on time, and record keeping and report writing achieve the required standards.

The practice supervisor and practitioner examine successes and obstacles, evaluate whether or not the work is achieving the desired outcomes and, where indicated, revise plans and strategies. The practice supervisor provides direct guidance and task assistance if necessary. If the practitioner has encountered difficulties outside their direct control, the practice supervisor may need to intervene and liaise with others.

Reflection

- > How well is the social worker completing the previously agreed tasks?
- > Do case records and reports accurately represent the work being done?
- > Do we need to revise our plans and strategies?
- > Do I need to more actively intervene to support practice?

Practice observation and feedback

This occurs in planned and unplanned ways. In some circumstances there are frequent opportunities for informal observation of practice. At times, unsolicited feedback about the practitioner is received in the form of complaints or compliments.

Practice supervisors need to respond flexibly to these situations, choosing when to directly intervene or wait for a scheduled practice development session for considered discussion. Practice supervisors also need to set up, and evaluate evidence from, formal direct observation of practice and feedback from children and families, carers and other professionals.

Planning for this involves agreeing which pieces of practice will be observed and who will be invited to provide feedback, as well as establishing objectives and assessment criteria, and gaining consent. You can find a range of resources focusing on observation in the 'promoting excellent social work practice' section of the website.

Reflection

- > How do you respond when you get unexpected feedback about a social worker?
- > Do you regularly set up planned, direct observations of social work practice?
- > If not, what is getting in the way of doing so?

Practitioner assessment and appraisal

Assessing and appraising a practitioner's capabilities involves evaluating the evidence from all of the segments in this model to make holistic judgements about their strengths and areas for development related to the practice areas that are being focussed on.

Feedback to practitioners about their professional capability at different points in time may be verbal or written or both, and formative or summative, such as at the end of a probation period, the ASYE (assessed and supported year in employment) or a university-assessed programme. Practice supervisors need to be authoritative, able to deal with emotional complexity, and make effective use of assessment processes and capability procedures when making decisions about practitioners who aren't meeting the required standards.

Through active involvement in relevant communities of practice and formal decision-making structures, practice supervisors can contribute to establishing appropriate professional standards and ensure that their judgements are in line with them.

Reflection

- > How well do you provide affirmative and critically constructive feedback to the social workers you supervise?
- > Do you always face up to the difficult conversations you need to have?
- > Are there spaces in which you can test your professional judgments with other colleagues you respect?

Adapted from: Fairtlough A (2017) *Professional leadership for social work practitioners and educators*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Other ways you can use this tool

As well as using the holistic containment wheel to reflect on your own practice, you could also use it to think about the whole environment of the organisation you work in:

How far are workload expectations fair and manageable?

Are positive steps taken to counter workforce inequalities, and promote a culture of respect, justice and honesty?

Is there a culture of encouraging staff to express and articulate their emotional reactions to the work?

How does the learning and development function within the organisation support you as a practice supervisor?

Is there a clearly articulated practice framework?

What opportunities to undertake research informed practice are provided to staff?

How effective are the human resources and information management systems in your organisation?

Do you receive the 'holistic containment' you need?



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.

References

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