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## Group supervision: supporting practitioners in their work with children and families in Children's Centres

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This article discusses how group supervision can be used to support the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of those working with children and families in early years provision in England. It is based on research conducted in 2008 with a cluster of four Children's Centres in the West Midlands in England, UK. The research evaluated group supervision with 12 Family Support Workers (FSWs) and three managers, using Realistic Evaluation as the methodological approach. The research identified key mechanisms within the group supervision process: the professional contract, group working agreement, facilitation and size of the group. In addition, the research identified key features of the context, namely management support and group dynamics. This article will focus on the key mechanisms within the group supervision process, and the key features of the context, whilst providing a brief overview of the outcomes.

**Keywords:** supervision; group supervision; realistic evaluation; continuing professional development; Children's Centres

### Supervision

Supervision is used within a wide range of helping professions including social work, psychology and mental health. It is defined as:

... what happens when people who work in the helping professions make a formal arrangement to think with one another or others about their work with a view to providing the best possible service to clients and enhancing their own personal and professional development. (Scaife 2001, 4)

Scaife (2001) recognises that there are many definitions of supervision, since it is used differently within the various professions and can be seen merely as a chance to talk. Scaife differentiates supervision from conversation by pointing out that supervision focuses on the needs of the supervisee rather than the supervisor, has a contract and supports the supervisee in enhancing the services they provide to those they work with. Simply put, Hawkins and Shohet (2006) define supervision as:

... a quintessential interpersonal interaction with the general goal that one person, the supervisor, meets with another, the supervisee, in an effort to make the latter more effective in helping people. (2006, 225)

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Supervision is viewed as being essential to some professions. In England, the Statutory Framework for the reformed Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2012) has introduced supervision as a right for early years practitioners. This emphasises that all early years providers:

... must put appropriate arrangements in place for the supervision of staff who have contact with children and families. Effective supervision provides support, coaching and training for the practitioner and promotes the interests of children. (DfE 2012, 17)

The EYFS views supervision as a tool to support continuous improvement, an opportunity for practitioners to discuss issues and identify solutions. However, within England supervision has not been widely used in early years provision or education. Steel (2001) suggests that supervision can be greeted with suspicion by practitioners. Elfer and Dearnley (2007) also state that it can be difficult for staff in early years provision – particularly in the private, voluntary and independent sector – to access any CPD. Thus, supervision may prove difficult to implement.

### **Group supervision**

Group supervision is the use of supervision within a group of peers, either with or without a facilitator. The advantages of group supervision include:

- opportunities for practitioners to open their work to others, resulting in increased accountability (Proctor 2000);
- gaining multiple perspectives (Wilson and Newton 2006);
- shared learning, feedback, reflection and input (Hawkins and Shohet 2006);
- economic use of resources, time, money and expertise (Proctor 2000; Hawkins and Shohet 2006);
- a reduction in professional isolation (Hanko 1987); and
- it can influence the context, with staff becoming more supportive of each other (Farouk 2004)

However, it is important to note the potential disadvantages of group supervision, which relate to the composition of the group, the time available and the group dynamics (Proctor 2000; Proctor and Inskipp 2001; Hawkins and Shohet 2006). For these reasons, whilst Proctor (2000) promotes the use of group supervision, she does not suggest that it should replace individual supervision, and instead encourages choice. Indeed, Steel (2001) and Cohen and Osterweil (1986) suggest a combination of individual and group supervision as the most effective approach.

### **Functions of supervision**

Hawkins and Shohet (2006) and Proctor (2000) identify three main functions of supervision:

- educative/formative – developing the skills, understanding and abilities of the supervisee, through reflection on, and exploration of, the supervisees' work;

- supportive/restorative – responding to the supervisees’ emotional response and reaction to their work, thereby reducing stress and the incidence of ‘burn out’; and
- managerial/normative – the quality control or accountability aspect of supervision, ensuring that the work maintains ethical standards.

Hanko (1999), Scaife and Scaife (2001) and Greenaway (2003) place the educative aspect of the process of supervision centrally. In comparison, Hawkins and Shohet (2006) highlight the supportive function of supervision and compare supervision to ‘pit-head time’. This was a miner’s right to have the time to wash off grime from the pit within his work time. The analogy is that supervision allows the equivalent time for professionals to wash off their stress and strong feelings from working at the ‘coal-face’ of other people’s difficulties and concerns, via reflection on how they were affected by this. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) suggest that if these emotional needs are not attended to, workers become less effective and possibly stressed or burnt-out. The CWDC/Skills for Life (2007) definition of supervision emphasises the managerial function and supervision is clearly linked to performance management and accountability, Steel (2001) suggests that whilst compulsory managerial supervision is the model favoured within social services and health, this may not be appropriate for other professional groups, including those in early years provision. This is because an emphasis on managerial function can lead to supervisees feeling that they must appear competent at all times, compromising the supportive and educative functions of supervision.

It is interesting to note that all three functions of supervision are described in the reformed EYFS (DfE 2012). This indicates the desire for a balanced use of supervision to support both practitioners and the families they work with. It will be important that early years practitioners have an opportunity to access all three functions within supervision, and that supervision does not become focused on the managerial function alone.

### **Agreements needed for group supervision**

Proctor and Inskipp (2001) use nested Russian dolls as a framework for the interdependence of the various agreements needed to facilitate group supervision:

- the largest Russian doll contains the professional contract;
- the second doll contains the group working agreement;
- the third contains the session agenda;
- the fourth represents the uncontracted space, where the supervisor balances the needs of the group members and the tasks to be supervised; and
- the fifth contains the mini-contract for any particular piece of supervision that is brought to the group.

The key texts on group supervision (Proctor and Inskipp 2001; Scaife 2001; Hawkins and Shohet 2006) highlight the professional contract as being a critical part of the group supervision process. Proctor and Inskipp (2001) describe the professional contract as containing the parameters of the group supervision process. These are negotiated with those commissioning the group supervision, and include accountability, confidentiality, codes of ethics, rights, responsibilities

and communication with managers. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) suggest inclusion of the size, attendance and membership of the group within the contract.

Farouk (2004) emphasises that a two-part entry phase is necessary. First, the group supervisor must develop the support of the management team through the professional contract, and second gain a commitment from those who may attend the group through the group working agreement. Proctor and Inskipp (2001) suggest the group working agreement should include the working arrangements, rules and responsibilities of the participants and of the supervisor. This can be recorded in terms of group rules, in order to enable the establishment of a safe climate for the supervisees to open their work to others. This is key, since group supervision can cause anxiety. Proctor (2000) asserts that ground rules can support the group in having 'good group manners' within the group supervision sessions, and serve to promote an atmosphere of empathy, respect and authenticity.

The remaining three Russian dolls relate to the detail of each session of group supervision, and what happens within each session. The session agenda is decided at the beginning of each session. Each discussion within group supervision contains a mini-contract, whereby the group supervisor seeks to establish and meet the needs of the supervisee. The supervisor also has to attend to the needs of the group as a whole alongside each individual, within the uncontracted space of the sessions.

### **Outcomes of group supervision**

There is limited research on the outcomes of group supervision, with some focusing on educative outcomes such as increased opportunities to solve problems collaboratively (Chalfant and Pysh 1989; Newton 1995). Other research has identified supportive outcomes, such as a reduction in feelings of isolation (Gupta 1985; Stringer et al. 1992) and the reassurance that others experience similar problems (Bozic and Carter 2002).

### **Contexts for group supervision**

Group supervision within education in England has been used within special schools (Gersch and Rawkins 1987), with head teachers (Gupta 1985), within the further education sector (Guishard 2000) and can span more than one site (Hanko 1987; Evans 2005). It has been used to support staff with children who have special educational needs (Norwich and Daniels 1997), including children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Newton 1995; Farouk 2004; and Pearpoint et al. 1992).

A key feature of the context identified in the literature is that of management valuing and supporting the group (Chalfant and Pysh 1989; Stringer et al. 1992; Hanko 1999). As an inhibiting factor, Norwich and Daniels (1997) reported that if a head teacher was sceptical or hostile to the setting up of group supervision it was unlikely to be successful. Views differ as to whether managers should attend group supervision sessions. Hanko (1999) and Stringer et al. (1992) suggest enlisting the head teacher's support, but highlight the potentially negative impact of his/her presence in the group, due to his/her role as manager. Gersch and Rawkins (1987) and Chalfant and Pysh (1989) suggest inviting the manager when needed.

### **The research**

Group supervision had been commissioned by the three managers of the cluster of four Children's Centres. The verbal professional contract was that all 12 Family

Support Workers (FSWs) from the Children's Centres were invited, with attendance being voluntary, and that managers would not attend. The group supervision sessions ran every 6–8 weeks. Sessions lasted for 90 minutes and were evaluated after a year of delivery. The model of group supervision utilised the three functions of supervision. Consequently, the FSWs were asked to reflect in their mini-contract on what they needed from the group such as:

- advice, skills and knowledge (educative function);
- discussion of the emotional needs resulting from their work (supportive function); and
- checking the work is ethical and will have the desired outcome (managerial function).

The model of supervision utilised Proctor's (2000) cooperative approach to group supervision, where the facilitator and the members of the group co-supervise the sessions.

The ground rules (group working agreement) recognised that participants of the group were at different developmental levels, and therefore participants could remain silent if they wished. The ground rules reinforced the links with managers, and only the supervisee could choose to take an issue forward for further discussion with the manager. Confidentiality was maintained, unless there was a breach of ethical conduct. The group ended on a positive note by utilising ideas from organisational psychology (Fullan 2003) – each participant was asked to share something positive that had happened to them. This allowed those who had been silent an opportunity to speak if they chose, often leading to FSWs complimenting each other, thus enhancing the supportive function of the group supervision.

### **Realistic Evaluation as the methodological framework for the research**

Pawson and Tilley (1997) state that Realistic Evaluation offers an alternative to positivist and interpretive approaches. It focuses on contextualised evaluation, leading to developments in practice and policy using the question:

'What works for whom in what circumstances?' (Tilley 2000, 4).

Realistic evaluation seeks to understand mechanisms and the conditions under which they are activated to produce specific outcomes using the following basic realist formula:

mechanism + context = outcome (Pawson and Tilley 1997, xv)

Pawson and Tilley (1997) emphasise that mechanisms, context features and outcomes may be hidden to the researcher. Thus, the researcher must remain open to unconsidered views. They further state that context features go beyond the location, and include other conditions that allow the mechanisms to come into operation. Outcomes include the intended and unintended consequences of an intervention, and therefore are defined by the participants of the intervention, in this case group supervision. This research sought to improve practice by constructing a

set of ‘descriptive particulars’ (Pawson and Tilley 1997, 119). These are the descriptive steps identified in this research that could be taken for the effective implementation of group supervision in other contexts.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Realistic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all three Children’s Centre managers and the 12 FSWs. The decision to interview all FSWs, including one who did not attend sessions, was taken to get a fuller understanding of both the promoting and the inhibiting features of the context and the outcomes. The questions were phrased so that the researcher remained constantly open to understanding the interviewee’s ideas, theories and views through the teacher–learner cycle. The researcher’s understanding of the interviewer’s views was checked repeatedly throughout the interview and at the end. Ethical issues of informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw and anonymity were included in line with the BPS (2006) Code of Ethics and Conduct, and the BERA (2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Participants selected to be interviewed individually or in pairs, at their preferred time and location. The interviews were recorded, and contemporaneous notes made during the interview in order to feed back verbally to each individual their views of the mechanisms, context features and outcomes at the end of the interview.

Data gained from the interviews were coded in an inductive way derived from the data, for positive and negative aspects of the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. A full transcript of each interview and written summary of the mechanisms, features of the context and outcomes was sent to each interviewee, in order to check the accuracy and coding. Some participants adapted their interview summary. Interrater reliability was not tested, as the focus was the subjective view of the interviewee.

The coded data from the interviews were transferred to a conceptually clustered matrix (Miles and Huberman 1994). Patterns were sought across columns to compare between groups, e.g. comparison of managers and FSWs. Patterns across the rows within the features of context, mechanisms and outcomes were calculated to a maximum frequency of 15. This created a set of ‘descriptive particulars’ for those working in a range of contexts to utilise when using group supervision.

## **Results**

### ***Mechanisms***

Positive mechanisms relate to those features of the group supervision process or the participants that are likely to promote the use of group supervision, whereas negative mechanisms would inhibit use.

The highest ranking mechanisms identified by FSWs are shown in Table 1, and formed parts of the professional contract (managers not present) and group working agreement (participants can choose to listen and not speak; relaxed informal approach).

Table 1. Highest ranked promoting and inhibiting mechanisms within the group supervision process.

| Promoting mechanism                             | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) | Inhibiting mechanism          | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Participants can choose to listen and not speak | 9                       | -                          | Timing                        | 7                       | -                          |
| Managers are not present                        | 7                       | 1                          | Domination by one participant | 4                       | 3                          |
| Relaxed informal approach                       | 7                       | -                          | Large group                   | 5                       | 1                          |
| More than one person's view                     | 7                       | -                          | Concerns about what to say    | 5                       | -                          |
| Facilitation of group                           | 3                       | 2                          |                               |                         |                            |

The group working agreement was discussed by the following participant:

FSW: I think you make very clear at each one that we come to if we don't feel like you know sharing the situation you don't have to, you can just come, and I feel happy and just sit there and I haven't got anything that I want to share at this one.

Similarly, the reported negative mechanisms of hours/timing and concerns about what to say also related to the group working agreement. Within this research, the FSWs varied in their experience and there was a need for ground rules that allowed all supervisees to develop at their own rate.

Facilitation was reported as a promoting mechanism; however, domination by one participant was identified as an inhibiting mechanism, which has clear links to the role of the supervisor in facilitating the group sessions. This was discussed by one of the managers:

Manager: ... as I say I've not been part of them, you could find if they're not managed correctly that certain people overtake the supervision and other people will sit back and not necessarily partake or get frustrated....

The size of the group was important, with too large being identified as an inhibiting factor, although there was little agreement on what was a suitable size:

FSW: Well ... if there were five people, around about that number, I would be more likely to attend, I don't want to be fighting to get my point across or feeling like I'm not getting an opportunity to speak.

*Context*

The context features were divided into two sections: features of the team and features of the profession as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Highest ranked promoting and inhibiting features of the context related to the team.

| Promoting context feature of the team       | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) | Inhibiting context feature or the team | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Team trusts and supports each other         | 7                       | 2                          | Poor team dynamics                     | 4                       | 2                          |
| Managers are in favour of group supervision | 7                       | 2                          | Lack of trust in the group             | 2                       | 1                          |

Table 3. Highest ranked promoting and inhibiting features of the context related to the profession.

| Promoting context feature of the profession | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) | Inhibiting context feature of the profession | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Stressful challenging work                  | 8                       | 3                          | Don't support families                       | 3                       | -                          |
| Need to share with colleagues               | 8                       | 2                          | Highly structured work                       | 2                       | -                          |
| Job is emotionally demanding                | 7                       | 2                          | Don't go into homes                          | 2                       | -                          |
| Varied role                                 | 7                       | 1                          | Can select own work                          | 2                       | -                          |
| Work with families                          | 6                       | 2                          |                                              |                         |                            |
| Can do job in different ways                | 6                       | 1                          |                                              |                         |                            |
| Work on own a lot                           | 6                       | -                          |                                              |                         |                            |

The primary feature of the context of the team, reflected in both the promoting and the inhibiting features of the context, was team dynamics:

FSW 1: People who like to be team players I think obviously.

FSW 2: Definitely, who are used to working in groups together maybe, who spend time as a team definitely, are used to sharing best practice....

FSW1: Yes, the trust's a big thing in the group supervision.

Management support was established through the professional contract:

FSW: I think the managers are supportive.

Interviewer: Do you think that's an important factor?

FSW: Yes, definitely. I'm sure if push came to shove, they'd say that it was probably a necessity....

And from a manager's perspective:

Manager: I think we definitely try and promote that as an opportunity and it's different from one-to-one supervision, it's different from the reflective group that they run and so I actually think it's a really good time for them to really think about themselves and other people and focusing on the issues they've got because it's a tricky job.

The context features related to questions on the types of profession who would or would not benefit from group supervision. The FSWs felt that their type of work benefited from group supervision:

FSW: There's a lot of things happening; working in groups, going into homes, birth visits, such a lot of things going on and I think because of coming across such things as a domestic violence issue or a child protection issue it is quite, can be, intense.

They were also able to identify other professions that might benefit from group supervision, including social workers, teachers and nurses:

FSW: I think it would be good for a lot of people, but more people who, caring professions and people who find it hard to leave it behind at the end of the day. I think that's it.

There were fewer responses concerning professions that might not need group supervision, with examples including the military and hairdressing; such professions were viewed as being more focused upon following instructions and being structured.

### ***Outcomes***

The positive outcomes of group supervision outweighed the negative outcomes in number and frequency. The outcomes were coded as educative or supportive and are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

These tables illustrate that there were high numbers of positive outcomes, and that these were both educative and supportive. The educative outcomes that can develop in the group supervision are reflected in the following extract:

FSW: I'm open minded and I believe in the value of talking with your colleagues really, in a structured environment, plus there's a part of me that really wants to help my colleagues but also really values their input into my ideas as well. So, sort of like, I'll take on board different ideas but I might not always use them because nobody does use everything. But you know if something can stop you in your tracks and makes you think 'Hold on I hadn't considered that that might be a good idea' so it's eye opening to me.

Similarly, the supportive outcomes from group supervision, in terms of team building and hearing how others feel, came across in the research:

FSW 1: Erm, I think it's just the fact of us all being together as a team and sort of, sort of, offering that, you know, that support really. It's just that, it very much appeals to me, I mean I do like group working in that respect where you're all sharing ideas and things.

FSW 2: I like that, the way when you go round you do have that choice that you do say something or if we don't.

FSW 1: I like that because the fact, because there are a lot of group discussions that you go to that a lot of people that don't even speak, and the fact that gives me more confidence because the fact that everybody gets a chance to speak and talk, it just makes you feel more relaxed because you know everybody is probably feeling a bit the same, a bit anxious, a bit nervous, but everybody gets an opportunity to talk. Because I think that's quite a fair way, there are lots and lots of group things you go to, even team meetings, lots of things isn't there, where not everybody gets the option to talk and I think that's quite important.

Table 4. Highest ranked positive educative and supportive outcomes.

| Positive educative outcome          | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) | Positive supportive outcome              | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Learn from others                   | 11                      | 3                          | Builds team relationships                | 10                      | 2                          |
| Get ideas and strategies            | 10                      | 3                          | Creates peer support                     | 9                       | 3                          |
| Get feedback from others            | 11                      | 2                          | Shows others are struggling or feel same | 10                      | 1                          |
| Share experiences                   | 10                      | 2                          | Gets team together                       | 8                       | 2                          |
| Get tips and advice                 | 10                      | 1                          | Getting reassurance                      | 9                       | 1                          |
| Getting other people's perspectives | 9                       | 1                          | Say how I feel                           | 8                       | 1                          |
| Sharing problems                    | 7                       | 1                          | Feel part of the team                    | 7                       | 1                          |
|                                     |                         |                            | Reduces isolation                        | 7                       | 1                          |
|                                     |                         |                            | Listening to others                      | 8                       | -                          |
|                                     |                         |                            | Knowing how others feel                  | 8                       | -                          |

Table 5. Highest ranked negative outcomes.

| Negative outcome                            | Number of FSWs (n = 12) | Number of managers (n = 3) |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Certain people may dominate                 | 3                       | 3                          |
| Concerns that others may think I can't cope | 5                       | -                          |
| May feel judged                             | 4                       | 1                          |
| Can feel a bit exposed                      | 4                       | -                          |
| Cost of time                                | 3                       | 1                          |

## Discussion

### *Mechanisms*

The professional contract contains agreement with commissioners of group supervision on confidentiality and lines of communication, and should be made clear before the group begins and reiterated at the beginning of every group session, as recommended by Proctor and Inskipp (2001). This research supports Hanko's (1999) position that managers should not attend group supervision sessions, or should attend only if invited by the group (Chalfant and Pysh 1989), and that links to managers are maintained as agreed in the professional contract and group working agreement.

The group working agreement included the duration and frequency of the group. The hours and timing of the group was raised as a negative mechanism. This research, as with Stringer et al. (1992) and Norwich and Daniels (1997), indicated the importance of ensuring that group supervision sessions were within the working hours of all the FSWs, as this was subject to change. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) indicate the value in reviewing these ground rules at the beginning of each session, in order to ensure that they continue to fulfil the needs of the group.

Interestingly, facilitation was reported as a negative and positive mechanism, demonstrating that it can promote or inhibit group supervision. This supports the work of Hawkins and Shohet (2006), who emphasise the need for supervisors to set a 'safe climate' – which in this research was a relaxed and informal approach – in order that supervisees could open their work to others. Supervision is a process that always contains some anxiety for the supervisees, as their work – or indeed themselves as people – may be perceived as being flawed.

The literature (Cohen and Osterweil 1986; Gersch and Rawkins 1987; Chalfant and Pysh 1989; Stringer et al. 1992) reported that group size can vary. A range of sizes is suggested, with Proctor (2000) suggesting a group size of between four and six to allow intimacy and variety, and Hanko (1999) suggesting up to 12. However, both state clearly that this is dependent on a number of other factors, such as access to other forms of supervision and the time available. Within this research, the size of the group varied from three to 10.

In this research, the FSWs were accessing regular individual supervision with their managers. Some FSWs emphasised group supervision as being complementary to individual supervision, and not a replacement for it, similar to Steel's (2001) proposal for a mixed model of group and individual supervision.

The availability of time was raised as an inhibiting factor that could prevent attendance at group supervision sessions. Both Chalfant and Pysh (1989) and Newton (1995) note that insufficient time allocated for implementation was a high-ranked concern for many participants. Stringer et al. (1992) and Norwich and Daniels (1997) state that having protected time was a promoting factor for the continuation and establishment of group supervision approaches. This research adds that time and the priority participants place on accessing supervision impact on engagement in group supervision. This reflects both the FSWs previous experience of supervision and the manager's stance on the value of supervision and reflection. Therefore the issue of time relates to discussion of the ongoing professional contract and the group working agreement.

The key mechanisms identified within this research have an important part to play in the development of group supervision within early years settings. The

research, alongside the literature, identifies the entry phase of group supervision as being crucial, so that all parties understand the aims and purposes. This is secured through clear working agreements with the managers (professional contract) and with those attending (group working agreement). This ideally incorporates agreements on how the group will be facilitated, the size of the group and the frequency of meetings.

### **Context**

There were two clear features of the context that promote the use of group supervision: the team trusts and supports each other, and the managers are in favour of group supervision. Chalfant and Pysh (1989) and Stringer et al. (1992) highlight the importance of management support, and Hanko (1999) advises of the need to remind managers how vital their support of the group will be at the initial contracting phase. Similarly Norwich and Daniels (1997) reported the negative impact of a hostile or sceptical manager. The dynamics of the group was seen as a potentially promoting or inhibiting factor by a majority of the FSWs and managers. The context plays a key role in determining which frameworks of group dynamics are most relevant in terms of changing membership or attendance patterns, with some such as Tuckman's (1965) group movement model more significant for groups of fixed membership.

The types of professions that may benefit from group supervision have great relevance to consideration of whether this approach can be used in early years settings. Many of the key factors identified by the FSWs and managers can be seen to apply to early years, since the work is emotionally demanding and stressful, varied and increasingly family-focused under the new EYFS. Although early years workers do not work alone, and may share rooms or spaces, group supervision can be viewed as an opportunity to share experiences and practice and increase cooperation and understanding between staff.

### **Outcomes**

This research found strong evidence to show that participants in group supervision achieve the positive educative outcomes anticipated by Hanko (1999), Proctor (2000), Proctor and Inskipp (2001) and Hawkins and Shohet (2006). Learning from others was identified by all FSWs who attended, and all managers, as an educative outcome of the group supervision sessions in this study. An additional educative outcome identified in this research was the gaining of other perspectives.

This research supported previous literature in identifying a high number of positive supportive outcomes. Previous evaluations of group supervision have found supportive outcomes to be recognised by participants even when the focus of the group is upon educative needs and outcomes. Gersch and Rawkins (1987) reported that 88% of respondents found that the teacher support group provided support and social contact for the members of the group as a latent function of the group, whereas the manifest function of the group was problem sharing and solving. Qualitative comments within both Bozic and Carter (2002) and Stringer et al. (1992) relate to participants feeling a reduction in isolation and feeling reassured that others experienced similar problems. Guishard (2000) and Bozic and Carter (2002) examined both the supportive and the educative outcomes of the group and

report enhanced levels of confidence for the majority of the participants. Supportive outcomes related to supporting others in the group were unanticipated, and not evident within the literature. This research highlights that it was important for a number of FSWs that they could help others and know how they feel.

The negative outcomes were lower in number and frequency of occurrence than the positive outcomes. This supports findings by Chalfant and Pysh (1989) that 88% of the statements by teachers relating to Teacher Assistance Teams (TATs) were positive, compared with 12% of negative statements.

## Conclusions

This research explored the use of group supervision with FSWs working in a cluster of four Children's Centres, and offered a set of descriptive particulars (Pawson and Tilley 1997) on the mechanisms within group supervision to be considered when establishing group supervision for professionals within the Children's Workforce. The key mechanisms identified within the present study are:

- the professional contract discussions with managers, including presence of managers; and
- the group working agreement with the participants, including ground rules, facilitation and size of group.

This research identified positive team dynamics and management support as crucial features of the context to promote the use of group supervision. The research identified those professions likely to benefit from group supervision as caring professions where the work is emotionally demanding and stressful and there is a need to share and talk. Professionals working within early years settings, as well as those supporting them, would fall within this description and therefore may wish to trial group supervision alongside individual supervision.

The positive outcomes described by FSWs and their managers outweighed the number and frequency of negative outcomes. The educative outcomes are similar to those described in the literature in terms of learning from others, sharing experiences and problems, and gaining ideas and strategies. A further educative outcome identified within this study was gaining other people's perspectives and views. This may have particular benefit in early years settings, where it may be helpful to hear different views on a child or family.

The supportive outcomes were similar to those reported in the literature: reduction in feelings of isolation, raised confidence and reassurance that others face similar problems and issues. Additional supportive outcomes identified in this research, beyond those in the literature, included supporting the development of team relationships and a desire to listen to and help others in the group.

This study concludes that group supervision can be an effective way of supporting FSWs in a cluster of Children's Centres, and identifies mechanisms and context features that are likely to hinder or help the success of this intervention. This is not to imply that these factors can be transferred directly to all settings and professional groups, as there are limitations to the research, including the size of the study, which is limited to the context and time in which the research was conducted.

The group supervision that has been researched in this study continues to grow since the data collection and analysis. Managers maintain their support of the

process, and have decided to make group supervision a part of the regularly timetabled continuous professional development for the FSWs.

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