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# **Supervision in an organisation where counsellors are a minority profession**

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While much supervision occurs within organisations in which counsellors work, it seems that the issues facing supervision in organisations where counsellors are the main professional group are different from those in organisations where counsellors are only a small percentage of the employees. One field in which counsellors are a minority profession is in education. For example, Education Queensland has approximately 55,000 employees, 400 of whom are guidance officers (the term used for school counsellors in this organisation). Counsellors therefore represent less than one per cent of the total number of employees, and proportions of this order would be expected in most, if not all, school systems. Using the supervision of guidance officers in Education Queensland as an example, this chapter will explore issues in an organisation where counsellors constitute a minority profession. An historical background will be presented first, followed by a discussion of the issues inherent in the provision of supervision in such an organisation. Examples of supervision practices will then be provided.

## **An historical background to school counselling and supervision**

Education Queensland has employed school counsellors as guidance officers since 1948 (Logan & Clarke, 1984). Since 1988 a senior guidance position (now titled senior guidance officer) had responsibility for the 'supervision, support, development and co-ordination functions associated with guidance and counselling services' (Parry, 1988, p. 3) within a Division of Special Education. These senior officers in the 1980s were responsible and accountable to the Division for professional management and support for guidance and counselling services, rather than taking a purely clinical supervision role.

However clinical supervision was a significant aspect of the pre-service component of guidance training. By the late 1980s, McCowan (1987) proposed a developmental model of supervision for guidance officers in training and internship. Although the concept of clarifying the difference between supervision for the organisation's needs (managerial supervision) and clinical supervision was beginning to be discussed at this time, there was a disproportionate emphasis on managerial supervision, which has

continued until the present time. Even with the inclusion of 'technical and clinical supervision' into the position description of both the senior guidance officers and guidance officers in 1993 (Department of Education, 1993a, b), there is still more of an emphasis on the organisation's goals rather than on best practice for clients.

Although training in clinical supervision was beginning to be developed by the early 1990s, a managerial structural change halted that provision in 1991-1993, in which the Division of Special Education was disbanded, and guidance officers were placed under school based management. One outcome of this was the loss of advocacy for clinical supervision and school counselling issues at upper levels of Education Queensland. Another outcome was that there was no longer a structure to provide supervision and training to the senior guidance officers.

## **Issues in school counselling supervision**

The minority status of guidance officers presents many issues both for the organisation and the guidance officers in terms of clinical supervision (Magnuson, Norem, & Bradley, 2000). These include issues related to the organisational culture, understanding of supervision, training in supervision, lack of a common language, the tyranny of distance, line management versus clinical supervision, and choice of a supervisor. Each is now discussed.

### **Organisational culture**

State education has traditionally been a large, centrally controlled culture based on defensive styles (Cooke & Lafferty, 2000). In a recent survey based on the Organisational Culture Inventory (Cooke & Lafferty, 1987), senior officers perceived the large organisation as based on power, competition and perfectionism styles (i.e. aggressive-defensive styles), combined with avoidance, dependence and convention styles (i.e. passive-defensive styles). Feedback in this culture is primarily negative, and mistakes are regarded as things to avoid rather than as opportunities for learning. Although the organisation is trying to work towards collegial development, it is only ten years since inspectors of schools were an integral part of the organisation, and the culture of inspection still prevails as in most hierarchical bureaucracies. The promotion of clinical supervision in this culture is difficult.

However, in the same survey of organisational culture (Cooke & Lafferty, 2000), respondents aspired to an organisational ideal based on constructive styles of achievement, self-actualising and affiliative styles. With the preference for a constructive style of organisational culture, there is likely to be greater congruence between the culture and clinical supervision, and more support and understanding of supervision in the future.

### **Understanding of supervision**

Understanding of supervision for counsellors varies widely within educational organisations. Because education systems are based on a hierarchical bureaucracy, the word supervision almost always connotes a supervisory relationship of power and control. Principals of schools have very limited understanding of

what clinical supervision for guidance officers means and sometimes view time release for supervision as a reduction in time for client service (McMahon, 1998). As line managers for guidance officers, they have complete responsibility for what goes on in their schools and often interpret supervision as only necessary for trainees, or for those showing diminished work performance, and not for practising professionals. The concept that practising professionals need and want clinical supervision is not yet well accepted. A prevailing view has been that once competency is achieved then supervision is no longer necessary. Often this misunderstanding is compounded by the limited understanding that many guidance officers themselves have in relation to clinical supervision. In addition, guidance officers have been employed as teachers prior to their postgraduate guidance and counselling training, which tends to perpetuate the already entrenched culture.

### **Training in supervision**

Training in clinical supervision is currently not provided by the educational organisation despite the obligations that are written into both the guidance and senior guidance positions. There are no incentives provided by the organisation for gaining formal qualifications in clinical supervision. The lack of training by the organisation not only undervalues clinical supervision but also means there is no sustained quality practice. The assumption seems to be that someone who is a good counsellor will make a good supervisor. However this is not necessarily so (Carroll, 1999). Carroll maintains that supervision is a profession in its own right, with its own knowledge content and skills. Therefore in the absence of training, the quality and provision of supervision is ad hoc, and there are very inconsistent practices in clinical supervision of guidance officers within the organisation (McMahon & Patton, 2000).

### **Lack of a common language**

This absence of training and the conflicting understandings of supervision in the organisation have contributed to a fourth issue, the lack of a common language in talking about supervision issues, evident even in discussions between the senior guidance officers responsible for clinical supervision (McMahon, 1998). For guidance officers, this lack of a common understanding and a common language often results in a lack of clear expectations about supervision and confusion about what their contribution, the processes and the outcomes might be. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that some guidance officers do not actively seek supervision. The lack of a common language and understanding of supervision also makes it difficult to promote a clinical supervision culture in the organisation, and severely hampers shared reflectiveness about best practice in clinical supervision and its collaborative development.

### **The tyranny of distance**

Difficulties arise in attempting to provide clinical supervision in an organisation that covers a large geographic area. For all schools to access appropriate personnel there is a system of transfers in the organisation. Historically, young and inexperienced personnel are transferred to less desirable regions in the state, usually rural and remote areas. Since most personnel in isolated schools, including guidance

officers, are inexperienced, this places an even greater importance on providing quality supervision for them. However, their supervising senior guidance officers are also likely to have less experience. The tyranny of distance in these districts also makes face-to-face meetings harder and more time-consuming to organise and attend, and communications between mobile personnel visiting numerous schools more difficult.

### **Line management versus clinical supervision**

A further issue is the role of the senior guidance officer, which combines the potentially competing duties of management and supervision. Besides taking a supportive role, the senior guidance officer is also a superior who may have a role in assessing performance or arranging internal transfers. This can result in issues of distrust in the supervision relationship. In the context of the defensive organisational culture described previously, both supervisor and supervisee can be seduced into avoiding challenging concerns and only addressing surface issues in an attempt to avoid difficulties and deflect criticism.

### **Choice of a supervisor**

The structure of the organisation provides little or no choice of supervisor. At best, a district may have two senior guidance officers, but guidance officers may not be offered any preference. There are some fundamental issues that emerge as a result.

- Supervising senior guidance officers may not have expertise in the educational sector their supervisees are working in and may lack specific knowledge needed by inexperienced guidance officers.
- Supervisors and supervisees may not operate from the same theoretical framework.
- Personality issues and lack of trust may impede the development of an effective supervision relationship.

### **Supervision in practice**

Despite these issues which to date remain largely unresolved, a range of supervisory practices has been implemented by guidance personnel. Several distinct features are evident about supervision in this organisation, specifically:

- a diversity of practices;
- variable levels of provision;
- practitioner driven supervision; and

- the widespread use of peer support.

Some examples of the diverse range of practices will now be discussed. Peer support and case discussion will be discussed first, followed by examples of supervision within the organisation and examples of supervision sourced outside the organisation.

### **Peer support**

In response to some of the previous issues, peer support has had a traditional base among school counsellors (McMahon & Patton, in press). The format is usually informal and supportive, ranging from chats on the phone and casual meetings to planned times together. This approach is seen as the least threatening and developed from necessity, in the absence of formal supervision. At the present time, most of the peer interaction constitutes responding with advice to a plea for help, as opposed to each person undertaking to be both supervisor and supervisee, giving clear feedback and challenging practice (Inskipp & Proctor, 1993).

### **Case discussion**

Part of the guidance officer role is the diagnosis of intellectual impairment (with the senior guidance officer to verify the diagnosis prior to ascertainment of level of educational need). In one district, guidance officers and a senior guidance officer meet regularly to discuss cases presented for verification of diagnosis. While many cases are straightforward, most of the discussion focuses on complex or ambiguous cases. These meetings have developed a positive process where the guidance officers share relevant research and professional readings and critically examine appropriate assessment measures. More importantly, these case discussions generate alternative hypotheses and interpretations, and explore what other lines of investigation would provide confirming or disconfirming information. The guidance officers have found that this process has contributed significantly to their professional knowledge and practice in this part of their role.

### **Supervision within the organisation**

Within the organisation, a diversity of practitioner-driven supervision practices has been developed. For example, evidence of individual supervision, group supervision, and combinations of both can be found. A model of individual and group supervision is presented followed by two examples of group supervision.

#### **A model of individual and group supervision**

Two supervisors in one geographic area of Education Queensland work as a team to facilitate supervision, in which the supervisee is regarded as a 'self-managed learner' (Proctor, 1994, p. 314). Group supervision is provided fortnightly for primary guidance officers and monthly for secondary guidance officers. In addition, formal individual supervision is provided, and informal telephone calls are encouraged. Supervisees choose the supervisor with whom they want to work.

The group supervision is approached developmentally, beginning with a discussion about what constitutes supervision and the responsibilities of each party. Group exercises were planned in the first

meetings and suggestions for case presentation were discussed along with examples of best practice. During the course of the group supervision, a variety of models were explored, such as Proctor's (1997) 'The bells that ring' process, the structured group process (Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Morris, Betz, & Hart, 1991) and the reflecting team.

For individual supervision, contracts were negotiated, including expectations of supervision and the responsibilities of both supervisor and supervisee. Two hours of individual supervision was offered once a term (four times a year) as a minimum, and guidance officers could request as many sessions as they wished. A learning approach underpinned the provision of supervision, and the importance of seeking supervision was stressed, especially for new guidance officers. On occasion, supervisors co-worked with guidance officers in schools to provide support to schools and to gauge how the guidance officer was working *in vivo*. Reviews of guidance practice were set up each semester with principals and the supervisor, both to provide feedback from the system, and to address any concerns from any party. This process is reflective of Barletta's (1996) suggestion that guidance officers participate in clinical, as well as administrative, or program, supervision.

### **Group supervision-a structured approach**

In another example, a group of school counsellors identified not only their need for supervision but also a person within the organisation who they wanted as the supervisor. The practicalities of meeting times and who would be a participant were arranged. After consideration, the participants decided to operate as a closed group so that trust between the supervisor and the group members could be maintained and deepened. The process used-structured group supervision (Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Morris, Betz, & Hart, 1991 )-was considered beneficial because it encouraged self-reflection and was non-judgmental.

The group saw many benefits of group supervision after a year of regular meetings. These included:

- being exposed to different ideas and perspectives;
- experiencing peer support while in an isolated role visiting different schools;
- having common work goals;
- shared understandings of the pressures of the role; and trust, confidentiality, and collegiality.

### **Group supervision-using creative processes**

In one area, several guidance officers discussed how different counselling approaches could be used in peer or group supervision to facilitate good processes and outcomes. From these discussions, several supervision processes and activities were developed and facilitated by guidance officers, based on symbol work, drawing and sandplay (Ishu Ishiyama, 1988; Pearson & Nolan, 1991; Wilkins, 1995).

One form of this process involved groups of two or three in which individuals took the roles of facilitator, case presenter' and observer. Guided reflection was used to help case presenters recall their

feelings and perceptions of the client, and of themselves as counsellors. Then presenters were asked to find symbols from an extensive sandplay collection that would represent their client, and themselves as counsellors. Presenters were asked about the qualities that the symbols represented for them. The counselling relationship was then explored by placing the symbols either on paper or in a sandtray, and depicting the context through drawing or moulding the sand. The facilitator used these processes to help the presenter reflect on their experience of the case, and then to consider how both the client and counsellor could develop a solution together. Discussion of observations and presenters' images of the future in the small groups was followed by a large group debrief.

These processes were an attempt to use non-verbal mediums and counselling strategies to help guidance officers think in different ways about their clients, themselves and the counselling relationship. Feedback from these supervision groups indicated that participants found these supervision activities helpful in developing insights not only into their cases, but also into their feelings and perceptions. It also illustrates the creative use of counselling skills to develop supervision processes.

### **Using technology in supervision**

One district in a rural remote area has attempted to overcome the tyranny of distance by the use of technology. The supervising senior guidance officer offers individual supervision not only in person as frequently as possible, but supplements this by individual email discussion and telephone supervision. Face-to-face group supervision is also alternated with tele-conferencing monthly to discuss cases. The lack of wide bandwidths at the moment prevents video tele-conferencing but it is envisaged for the future. Clinically based email discussion lists as well as web chat rooms with web casts, full streaming video and PowerPoint slide presentations are also envisaged for the future of supervision in remote areas.

### **Peer supervision of supervisors**

At the present time, although senior guidance officers provide clinical supervision for guidance personnel, the organisation does not systemically provide any clinical supervision for them. Thus of necessity, these senior people provide peer supervision amongst themselves. In some districts this entails regular meeting times with set agendas and informal contracts, while in other districts, it is on more of a needs basis. For example, one senior guidance officer group schedules meetings once a month for a day. The group comprises six or seven members who service three different but geographically adjoining districts. The agenda for the day includes:

- participation in a statewide teleconference of senior guidance officers;
- a session devoted to supervision issues and practice with feedback in the group; and
- a session for managerial and organisational goals such as staffing and policy Issues.

The day's agenda reflects the supervisors' needs to receive clinical supervision, administrative supervision, and ongoing collegial support.



## **Sourcing supervision external to the organisation**

An issue for guidance personnel is whether to seek supervision from outside supervisors in addition to that available through the organisation. Although supervisors within the organisation have in-depth knowledge of the organisation and its aims and culture, an external supervisor may have different and challenging perspectives. Two examples are now discussed, the first relating to an individual, and the second to a group who sought external supervision.

### **Individual supervision**

A guidance officer with five years' experience was finding many of her cases to be very difficult and had worked with the aftermath of five suicides in a year. Her needs were not being met by the organisation's designated supervisor. There were gender issues, power issues, a perceived lack of training in the appointed supervisor and no choice of a compatible supervisor. She therefore sought supervision from outside the organisation, for which she paid. The benefits she perceived were confidentiality and trust, an ability to be totally honest, to learn without being judged incompetent, and the security of a contractual arrangement.

### **Group supervision-a reflecting team**

A group of guidance officers wanted additional peer supervision which would provide a different approach, allow for greater discussion of cases, and draw from their different experiences and skills. They approached staff lecturing in counselling and supervision at a local university, two of whom contracted to provide regular supervision and training in a solution-focused reflecting team approach to supervision (see Lowe & Guy, 1999). The guidance officers financed this supervision and training by each contributing from their professional development funding.

Initially, the supervisors provided training and facilitated the supervision process. Over time, group members took increasing responsibility for the supervision process. Since then, they have continued to meet and facilitate their own peer supervision over several years.

The solution-focused reflecting teams approach was seen as congruent with the orientation of guidance officers, and as offering useful strategies as well as a process for listening and reflecting about cases, and getting different perspectives and ideas. However, while the initial focus of the supervision was on individual cases and interventions, it has broadened to include the counsellors' personal reactions and responses. For the counsellors involved, the process has become more incidental, and the major benefits have become the supportive group. Such groups are characterised by high levels of trust and commitment, and provide the opportunity to take risks in reflecting on one's own practice and relationships.

## **A future vision for supervision in an educational setting**

As evidenced by these examples, good supervision can take place in spite of organisational impediments. However, organisational environments can encourage the growth of a strong supervision culture and good practice. It is encouraging to note Cooke and Lafferty's (2000) finding that education staff would prefer a

constructive organisational culture based on achievement, self actualising and affiliative styles. These styles are congruent with clinical supervision, and would be supportive of a supervision culture for practising professionals to provide for quality outcomes. It should be recognised that overcoming organisational inertia may require leadership, clear articulation of new directions and/or a groundswell of commitment to change. More specifically, for good supervisory practices to be implemented system wide, advocacy will be required at policy-making levels in the organisation.

Within the profession, supervision could be greatly enhanced by a comprehensive program of induction and training, for new supervisors and supervisees, provided by the organisation. This could be further enhanced by ongoing professional development for supervisors and supervisees, and by processes for recognising, valuing and encouraging academic study and the development of expertise in clinical supervision. In rural and remote areas, there is a need for technological resources and new and developing technologies such as wide bandwidths and chat rooms. These technologies can be used to provide training, professional development and quality supervision experiences for all guidance officers. Ultimately, though, a strong supervision culture depends upon guidance officers themselves, particularly through their own networks and collaboration.

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