

## Towards a Virtuosity of School Leadership: clinical support and supervision as professional learning

### Introduction

Our clinical support and supervision project has its origins in two distinct but potentially, correlated areas. Initially it was designed as a response to the concern for how senior school leaders are increasingly being expected to manage the escalating demand to care for the social, emotional and physical health of pupils, families and often the wider community. In addition to these comparatively recent developments in the role of school leaders, has been the challenge to recruit and retain headteachers. This paper reports on our research findings over a five-year period of providing a professional learning service to senior school leaders that we refer to as ‘clinical support and supervision’. Alongside providing the service, the authors undertook two phases of qualitative research. The first was an evaluative study, via questionnaires (Reid and Soan, 2018) and the second encompassed in-depth narrative interviews with participants/supervisees, as described in what follows. Although drawing on both phases of the supervision project and research, our primary focus here is on the rich, lived-experience of four headteachers.

It is not our intention to provide a technical model of support and supervision, but rather to offer a process of professional learning based on values **and how these influence** educational leadership. Additionally, we acknowledge a ‘dark-side’ of supervision practice, where seductive Foucauldian power/knowledge forces can perpetuate punitive aspects of governmentality. It is therefore useful to clarify at this early stage, that our model of clinical support

and supervision is not grounded in neo-liberal accountability measures. Importantly we propose that impactful professional (and personal) decision-making is more likely to occur when processes of accountability, standards and monitoring are replaced by a non-judgemental supportive environment.

Within this paper, our initial discussion focuses on the contested nature of supervision in educational settings, with particular **attention** on how conceptions of supervision facilitate professional learning. We then provide the rationale for our model of clinical support and supervision that has informed the supervisory practice reported in this research. Our findings result from the analysis of a series of rich contextual narratives from four headteachers, **summarised into three** general themes (professional learning; health and well-being; influences on the school community) common to each participant. **An illustrative case study is also presented to provide evidence of the impact of clinical support and supervision on the lived experience of one headteacher.**

Next, we draw on Biesta's (2013, 2017a and 2017b) pedagogy of interruption and his conception of 'grown-up' educational responses, to discuss the theoretical foundation relating to what it might mean to be an educational leader required to make professionally situated judgments. Importantly we highlight how clinical support and supervision enables headteachers to reclaim the role of educational leaders to make such judgements.

## **Clinical support and supervision in schools**

### ***Overview***

The literature on supervision within school environments provides a 'mixed-bag' as to the efficacy of the process and equally what supervision, let alone, 'clinical' supervision may entail. We provide a brief overview of this landscape before going on to outline the rationale and process of the model used in our research and practice. What will become clear is that the practice of supervision represents a contested space, often leading to confusion over intention and therefore outcome. For example, in one of the few articles that seeks to combine educational and clinical supervision, Cornforth and Claiborne (2008) highlight the tension between the duality inherent within a process that has the potential to be linked to care and support as well as accountability. Of particular concern is the potentially problematic nature of the supervisor/supervisee relationship where the supervisor is to be accountable and therefore responsible for the supervisee and their practice. Conversely, Cornforth and Claiborne recognise the possibility that the focus on support and care can lead to an unhelpful solipsism on the part of the supervisee, with an enhanced focus on the 'self' to the detriment of the primary object (the pupil/learner) and we would include other colleagues and family members. Their over-riding concern is that within highly prescribed and monitored neo-liberal structures, the focus shifts to the 'shady façade of the autonomous individual' (p.156), and away from professional collaboration and accountability situated with government and policy makers. It would appear that the understanding and process of supervision may elide between possibilities of standardised neo-liberal accountability and **potentially** overly indulgent self-reflection. Existing literature unfortunately, as we shall find below, does not offer much clarification.

### ***Collusion and occlusion***

Much of the research that comes under the mantle of supervision in education has an instrumental and therefore performative, directional focus with success usually judged in relation to the impact on standardised professional practice. Kemmis et al. (2014) provide examples of **ineffective supervision situated within a mentoring relationship** and, just as Cornforth and Claiborne (2008) warn, identify the risk of it taking on an accountability role. Wood (2016) discusses group supervision for experienced teachers within the role of 'solution circles', and although having a positive impact on awareness of beliefs, little evidence was found as regards improving self-efficacy or having a positive impact on pupils.

A meta-analysis carried out by Kraft, Blazer and Hogan (2018) looked at the effectiveness of teacher coaching and although not supervision as we would **recognise** it, their findings do offer a little more hope that one-to-one professional development models may have a slight positive impact on practice. Again, the focus is often instrumental and refers to observations followed by feedback. Talbot (2009), recognises that one-to-one supervision based on humanistic principles is significantly different from performative goal directed mentoring and although **unable to** confirm the positive impact of his technique, it is acknowledged that improvement of professional expertise can be pursued by a 'learner-centred' approach. We have not found **research** evidence that **explores** supervision **in the UK**, with support, for school leaders has been explored.

Research on supervision provides an occluded landscape from which it is difficult to discern any permanent features in relation to definition, practice and

even outcome. **As we move towards our** definition we need to be **aware** of the assumption that even within the counselling field, supervision may always be viewed as an **essential feature of professional practice**. Feltham (2002) notes that, 'We might have learned from Foucault and others the dangers of a surveillance culture' (p.27), thus highlighting the need to examine the assumptions inherent in the supposed 'virtue' of support and supervision. Indeed, supervision could itself be viewed as an aspect of Foucault's notion of power and the products of power, as exercised through the governing practices of self-regulation, self-improvement and self-development (Edwards, 1997; Reid, 2006). Edwards explains, 'Power is exercised through seduction rather than repression (1997, p9)'. In this way, governmentality works through seducing people to become agents of the state (Kemmis, et al. 2014), governing themselves rather than through coercion. Thus, in advocating the benefits we need also to be mindful that support and supervision can add to the development of a discourse which masks a low-trust, surveillance culture within education and other services within social institutions.

Moving on, our research has focused on the **professional** learning benefits derived from support and supervision within education, but before continuing it may be useful to comment further. Foucault's use of discourse is linked to social institutions, such as education, law and the family, and to disciplinary practices such as psychology, medicine, science, psychotherapy and pedagogy. As such, practices *discipline* the conduct of those who come within the influence of the social institutions that sustain these practices. Knowledge is required of subjects (for example, via official statistical surveys, medical records, educational reports and so on) in order for power to be

exercised. In this sense power governs through knowledge of the population, but is internalised by individuals who are culturally socialised within institutions. This socialisation leads to mechanisms of self-surveillance where educators consent, albeit often unconsciously (Bainbridge, Gaitanidis and Hout, 2018), to the operations of governmentality. Atkinson, considering how such governmentality functions in education, calls this 'the collusion in our own oppression' (2003, p.9) which can be viewed as a form of self-disciplining practice.

The view of power/knowledge is not static however and changes over time. Foucault (1980) stated that each epoch or each society, has its *regimes of truth*; in other words, types of discourses that are accepted and function as true rather than false. Such discourses define what can be said and who can say it, but, by definition, they also define what cannot be said, as they 'rule out other ways of thinking and acting' (MacLure, 2003, p.178). This suggests that the individual's viewpoint, where it differs from the common-sense *regime of truth*, may be 'ruled out' and not 'heard'. Central to our conception of clinical support and supervision is the provision of a safe space to resist regimes of truth, to consider educational leadership beyond colluding with oppressive governmentality.

### ***Definitions of supervision: a contested space***

Using the term clinical support and supervision can help to avoid confusion with line management supervision and accountability. Clinical supervision, as used in the therapeutic and nursing professions, involves the practitioner discussing

their case-work and related professional issues with an experienced supervisor. The purpose is to reflect on practice, learn from the experience and ensure that a good service is offered to 'clients' or patients. The aim of this specific supervision project was to provide an external supervisor so that headteachers and senior leaders had an opportunity to reflect on, air and discuss professional practice issues in a confidential setting; a 'safe space' where issues could be shared and explored. The service offered a space to **explore** professional knowledge and increase skills, as well as learn how to cope with the many challenges faced (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Alila et al, 2016). **Hence, supervision can be viewed within the context of professional learning, facilitating the development of professional skills and practice, encompassing as it does, collaboration, reflection and dialogue.**

In offering definitions, there is a danger that we become reductive, however to achieve some breadth, definitions are now drawn from the literature across a range of professional contexts. Schuck and Wood's **confirm the role of collaboration while noting that:**

Fundamental to the relationship is good rapport and a working alliance (2011, p.15).

Scaife (2001) defines professional supervision as:

... providing the best possible service to clients, enhancing their own personal and professional development and gaining support in relation to the emotional demands of work' (Scaife, 2001, p. 4)

Although originally conceptualised within a mental health context, **these definitions also work well** for our focus on educational settings and provides the

additional incentive to consider what the 'best possible service to clients' might be from a head teacher's perspective.

Within education, observation of teaching practice may be termed supervision, but we should make clear clinical support and supervision is not an assessment or accountability process. Supervision, is a not a straightforward process. The supervisor is not working directly with a 'client' and in most cases is not observing the supervisee's practice. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) stress the collaborative nature of the work and emphasise the importance of encouraging a learning culture in the practice of clinical support and supervision. For example, in our project it is the supervisee who selects what to 'bring' to the session.

The literature is extensive and is covered in more detail in Reid and Soan (2018). For brevity our model is framed by the work of Inskipp and Proctor (1993) who describe supervision as having *formative, normative* and *restorative* qualities. Additionally, our theoretical model for support and supervision used in this project favours an integrative model (Westergaard, 2013) as it provides a framework within which the functions of supervision can be met. Egan's (2007) three stage model used in counselling and other helping interactions provides the structure that can guide a session. Egan's model, incorporating the necessary listening and counselling skills, moves from identifying the issue, to considering options and then planning for change. The three stages can be summarised as:

- Enabling the supervisee to tell the story of 'where they are' at the current time with their 'problem' / or a particular case
- Enabling the supervisee to explore the options available to resolve the problem / move forward with the case



- Enabling the supervisee to suggest, evaluate and plan action for the future.

Also useful in the context of our research, Hawkins and Shohet (2006) draw on a powerful metaphor to emphasise the importance of the restorative aspect. They point to the battle fought by British coal miners in the 1920s, where they eventually won the right to ‘wash off the dirt of their labours’ at the pit head, in the employer’s time – rather than in their own time away from the workplace: ‘Supervision is the equivalent for those that work at the coal-face of personal distress, disease and fragmentation’ (p.58). Our model of supervision provides a non-judgmental space for personal and professional reflexivity where, over a two-hour period, headteachers can wash off the dirt of their labour, before returning either to their setting or home. We now provide the details of the research process before presenting the findings in the form of a case study and thematic analysis.

### **Clinical support and supervision: delivery, research and analysis**

The support and supervision service ran for three years, between 2014 and 2017 during which period participants received six, two-hour supervisory sessions over the course of an academic year with an experienced supervisor. The participants were all headteachers within a county-wide Multi-Academy Trust (these are English state funded schools independent of the Local Authority). The details of this model of supervisory service and interim evaluations can be found in Reid and Soan (2018). Key findings were that the participants found clinical

support and supervision to be a powerful and restorative experience, professionally, personally and emotionally.

The research reported here, conducted during 2017 by the three authors, represents an extended phase with the focus on conducting in-depth narrative interviews at the end of a period of supervision and support. Four headteachers agreed to a series of follow-up interviews, while the views of the funder of the project on the perceived impact of the service were also sought. The participants and funder were contacted individually via email and asked if they would participate in two, one-hour narrative style interviews with one of the researchers. It was agreed that all participants would receive a copy of the transcript for their revision, which they would send back as approved for use by the researchers in the analysis and write up. All the participants were free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. As we were interested in discovering the impact of the supervision service, each interview began with simple questions regarding what the participant thought the impact of supervision had been on their practice, pupils and the wider school setting. Consequently, their narrative developed during the loosely structured interviews.

The first and second interviews were initially analysed individually and then in a team by the three authors using a proforma developed by West (1996). The proforma is used to identify emerging themes that can be supported by direct participant quotes and also records the researchers' personal responses. Hence, any patterns arising in each participant's interview uses the words of the

individual participant in the early stage of analysis – this also avoids moving too quickly to overarching themes. It provides a way of recording key issues relating to the processes of the interview; the circumstances within and surrounding the dialogue and other issues which may influence the discussion, and in turn, the analysis. This developed process of analysis, then, entailed several readings of the transcripts to look for a Gestalt or general narrative, as well as highlighting specific themes across the participant group related to the impact of supervision for the headteachers, for the school, and for the pupils.

The feedback from supervisees during the research interviews has been wholly positive and our analysis established three broad themes further divided into sub-themes:

1. Professional learning:

- Enhanced critical reflection and processing complex thoughts

- Better strategic management and delegation

- Encouraging autonomy

- Listening to and anticipating staff needs

2. Health and well-being:

- Reduced stress and anxiety

- Better work/life balance

- Improved ability to care for oneself

3. Wider school culture (no sub-themes)

Although we acknowledge that not all supervisees' experience will match these themes, the above does offer the advantage of presenting the wide-ranging impact of support and supervision. We shall present our findings in two formats, first as a thematic analysis that includes material from each of our participants, **highlighting the more general potential applicability of these themes**. Second, a single case study is offered to provide **insight into how these themes are experienced in the rich contextual professional and personal life of a particular headteacher**.

## **Thematic analysis**

### ***Professional Learning***

The impact of supervision on professional learning can be organised into four sub-themes, the first focuses on how engaging with feelings and emotions has enhanced critical reflection, leading to a more orderly processing of complex thoughts. For example, 'Christopher's' experience allows him to:

'... unpack an awful lot of my thoughts and processes that are going on and in a sense park a lot of them ... and come back to school a bit more refocused and slightly more energised'.

'Lisa's' narrative also drew attention to the importance of having a reflective space and supports the second sub-theme that links supervision with a greater ability to make strategic management decisions. When coupled with the decision to engage in less micro-managing and a move towards further delegation to

senior staff, Lisa 'comes to the conclusion of - simple - just put a notice in your door "Look, I'm in a meeting - tell the office"'.

The third sub-theme continues the sentiments of Lisa's door notice and witnesses head teachers encouraging their staff to be more autonomous. 'Clare' is aware of the ability within her staff but recognises the tension between the different perceptions of her role as leader and:

'... quickly learnt that I'd learnt to be that person they'd painted me as, and that's not the leader I wanted to be. I wanted people to find their own answers because they are a very talented team'.

The example above and final sub-theme, listening to and anticipating the needs of others, offers a perspective not evident in our earlier research (Reid and Soan, 2018) and can be argued to represent a more long-term impact of supervision. For Christopher, the Executive Head of two schools, the opportunity to slow down his busy life has encouraged him to 'seek counsel from other people' and to evolve his style of leadership as he identifies that he is 'able to give myself that time in the first place'.

For all of our participants the time and space offered by supervision has supported professional learning, not in the stultified manner of following standardised practice, or becoming 'agents of the state', but in a manner in which professionals have been able to make careful and thoughtful situated judgements. The second general theme, with three sub-themes, engages with the more personal and emotional aspects of leadership under the overarching theme of health and well-being.

### ***Health and well-being***

The nature of supervision offered within this project accepts the complex inter-relatedness between the personal and professional, confirmed by the ubiquity of the 'stress and anxiety reduction' sub-theme. For Lisa, supervision ends the cycle of being stuck 'going round in circles ... and it breaks that stress.' James claims that 'the impact for me initially has been around having that additional outlet to deal with anxieties and stresses of work in a sort of comprehensive way'.

Christopher and Clare also acknowledge how their improved well-being has an impact on their families, as it enables them to improve their personal life by making better work-life balance decisions. Clare's partner no longer has to be a late-night sounding board, as she is able to 'talk about things and then leave them at school, whereas before I was coming home and saying to my partner "what do you think about this?"' And Christopher acknowledges that his family now get 'what they deserve of me' as he is 'going home calm more relaxed, I'm not working until 12 o'clock every night'.

Ultimately this improved sense of well-being is supported by the third sub-theme that is directed towards having a more caring attitude towards oneself and, as such, a more balanced expectation of the role of a headteacher. James is pleased to have a place where there is not an expectation to necessarily talk about education and, in sharing his experience of supervision with other heads, notes that 'they say they just want someone to talk with - and I think that's the difference supervision brings'. Christopher identifies 'that sort of repetitive cycle' leading to feeling 'guilty at taking a day out once a year' acknowledging that supervision offers the 'permission from someone to tell me

you need that'. Clare uses supervision to be able to admit that 'Clare's a bit vulnerable ... and it's OK' and even if, she says, 'hasn't got a clue where to start' her colleagues 'will always come up with answers and so everyone grows as a result of that'.

The theme of health and well-being, although being seen to have an impact on colleagues and family, is largely centred on the individual, while our final theme considers what the school-wide implications of supervision might be.

### ***Wider school culture***

We accept that the likelihood of being able to provide clear positivistic cause and effect links between individual supervision and school outcomes is problematic. Yet there are commonalities within the narratives of each of our participants relating to communication with the school community around health and well-being, along with broader school culture issues. Christopher is able to make direct links between his experience of the time and space made legitimate by supervision and how he now leads his staff:

'... it's at the leadership level where I can now say - let's gather together, let's have a bit of space and time ... and - "actually, look make sure you are taking that 'me' time - because you need it"'.

The impact of Clare's supervision on her staff is recognised by another senior colleague who reflects back to Clare 'this has been massive for you - so it's this idea that we all have our vulnerabilities, we all have our comfort zone'. While Clare can acknowledge that 'I'm asking them to step out of theirs [comfort zone] and in doing so, that I am stepping out of mine'.

As both academic researchers and supervisors we acknowledge that for many the notion of counselling, therapy or supervision can be loaded with negative connotations of weakness, or overly indulgent and endless introspection. Possibly due to James being the most experienced head teacher he was able to be open and bold about the process, putting 'Supervision' on the staffroom calendar knowing that this would generate conversation amongst the staff. His plan was successful noting:

'... off the back of some of the staffroom conversations around supervision, we're now paying a greater fee to just have counselling there as a helpline service, and as six sessions, and there has been a significant uptake in that this year'.

What is particularly compelling is the breadth of impact in James' school: From recognising that his Chair of Governors was intrigued by the process and started 'asking a variety of questions that wouldn't have been there before – you know – How are you feeling?' To staff now engaging in 'very open conversations and dialogue' where 'no-one is going to think differently of me ... so, maybe it's just learning to talk about stuff more?'

The schools taking part in the supervision project were all part of a group of schools within a Multi-Academy Trust and an interview with a member of the senior leadership team noted the wider impact beyond individual schools and headteachers. Supervision was seen to be 'the difference between going on and giving up' and that it 'categorically, had a knock-on effect for the leadership team'. Although 'one-off' support has always been made available, the ongoing support and supervision we provided was enthusiastically received. The



comment was ‘what has been interesting about supervision is for those who have experienced it, they come back and said – can we definitely still have it?’ It also came as no surprise that the barrier for supervision being more widely available across the academy schools was the obvious financial implication. Therefore, in the current political climate where governors are being encouraged to budget carefully, while also considering how they look after their senior leaders, it was noted that ‘if you say you have a commitment to their wellbeing, what are you actually doing?’

### **Case Study: ‘James’**

James has been a headteacher for more than ten years and is the longest serving Head to have taken part in the supervision project. He currently works in a large, challenging, rural primary school that, having received repeated good Ofsted inspection results, is now oversubscribed. James took part in two narrative style interviews at the end of the supervision service and was interviewed again one year later. Before supervision, James described how he would get trapped into over-thinking minor problems and provides an evocative ‘warehouse’ metaphor to account for how his experience of supervision has changed this:

‘... you’ve got lots of stacked piles on top of each other and you know that the safety limit is 30, and you can’t take another one because it’s going to make the pile wobbly, so you’ve got to remove one of them so you can add another, but I think it’s the removal bit that is complex without something like supervision where I’m sort of slowly learning to move those pieces a little bit quicker.’

In a supervisory relationship, James is able to move thoughts around without them all tumbling down, the metaphorical pile of jobs to do can then be re-assembled in a more manageable way, even though they remain daunting. James identifies that being given time to organize his thoughts during supervision has also made him aware of the importance for him and his staff to take time to make decisions.

As a consequence of his own experiences James had gained sufficient knowledge of supervisory principles to begin to apply these to the managerial aspect of his role. He now plans an afternoon away from school each week just to have time to think, has 'open' staff meetings where all staff are invited to participate, and has changed times of assemblies and meetings to enable groups of staff to meet up for longer periods of time. A member of staff new to the school described the school as having:

'...a very interesting democracy here - I haven't seen that before where you've got a democratic process going on that is a genuine democracy not a kind of puppet democracy, you know, where you listen but you go and do whatever anyway.'

James' experience of being listened to and having time to reflect has led him to appreciate, not only the importance of providing spaces where his own staff can be heard, but also that their thoughts can be acted on. Associated with this more open management style, James has also become less involved in trying to manage all aspects of school life. As the result of:

'... quite an interesting discussion there around "what roles do we all want to play in the school moving forward?" ... So, for us um there's a

really clear level of responsibility now in every single member of the senior team, and what they are responsible for.'

Taking time to make decisions and to decide who should make them has increased the autonomy of members of staff throughout the school structure, and highlights the impact of headteacher-focused supervision on the whole school community.

This school-wide impact of supervision is not only evidenced at the managerial level, but can also be observed in the broad context of health and well-being. James has found that even though supervision took place about every two months it has provided a long-lasting outlet for stress and anxiety:

'... there's an element of frustration that you're taking home with you in either progressively bottling up until you sort of release it in some other way, be it having a moody strop ... so it's probably enabling that process to dissipate a bit so there's less hangover from Friday, you know the Friday hangover from work doesn't eat into the entire weekend ...'

The description of the 'Friday hangover' is a powerful one and emphasises the potentially damaging conflation of the private and professional. James also argues that the move to more open management and increased autonomy, inspired by his supervision, has led to a reduction of staff absence due to stress or feeling depressed. Staff are of course still absent but:

'There has been less absence generally, and the reasons people are giving are still coughs and colds, flues, stomach bugs rather than stressed, depressed, anxious.'

A reduction in absence linked to stress and anxiety has also been accompanied by an increase in care with James observing:

‘I think the caring bit I think has come in, I think there is a lot more caring. ... Although we are a school that is really known for caring for our kids ... we perhaps hadn’t repeated that with our own staff, so I think that has been quite a change for us that the staff now are far more involved in each other’s care and looking after each other.’

It is our contention that James’ case study adds to the thematic analysis by providing insight into the impact supervision can have on the complex professional and personal lives of headteachers.

Our analysis provides a clear indication as to the important and novel contribution clinical support and supervision can make towards professional learning. The following discussion locates these findings within the crisis of senior leader recruitment and retention. We shall frame the task of being an educational leader and the process of support and supervision within Biesta’s conception of a pedagogy of interruption and ‘grown-up-ness’ (2013, 2017a). In doing this we use Biesta’s call to consider the purpose of education, including educational leadership and making mature, ‘desirable’ professionally situated judgements.

## **Discussion**

### ***The purpose of educational leadership***

The work of Gert Biesta and his over-arching claim that good educators need to consider the multiple purposes of education and accept its uncomfortable, or risky nature, helps us to conceptually frame the experience of headteachers and discuss our findings. Notably, Biesta's (2015) discussion of 'grown-up-ness' informs our evolving understanding of the process and outcomes of clinical support and supervision, particularly its role in encouraging senior school leaders to make mature, desirable professionally situated judgements.

Drawing on interviews that included senior school leaders, Biesta, Priestly and Robinson (2015) provide an ecological model of teacher agency, noting that teachers hold a 'mishmash' of competing and vague ideas about the purpose of education, often stuck within current hegemonic discourses of surveillance and power (Foucault, 1980). Indeed, just as Biesta (2012) sought to 'give teaching back to education' positioning schools as a special place where teaching happens, schools can also be re-defined as special places where educational leadership takes place. Equally, headteachers can rediscover what it means to educate (Biesta, 2017a) with the potential to lead an educational setting beyond stultifying accountancy practices of evaluation and monitoring. We contend that our model of support and supervision has the potential to provide a space for headteachers to reconnect with their understanding of the purpose of education. What is distinctive about this process is that headteachers can think and speak without judgment, therefore encountering ideas beyond established practice and discourse to imagine and offer solutions particular to their settings.

The overwhelming emphasis headteachers place on monitoring and evaluation (Ipsos, 2015), conflated by increased governmental monitoring, provides little opportunity for innovation. Let alone the possibility to consider the wider and more meaningful purpose of education and how this might be realised in their own schools. There is the additional concern that clinical support and supervision can fall into this trap and operate as an agent of the state, obfuscating opportunities for innovative, professionally situated judgments. It is from the connection between Biesta's desire to give teaching back to education (2012) and rediscover teaching (2017a) within the process of clinical supervision, that it may be possible to re-imagine headteachers rediscovering leadership - resulting in giving leadership back to educational leaders.

Much of headteachers' work is a response to the spectre of an unrequested Ofsted inspection and the annual publication of various 'performance indicators', including, for example, league tables from examination/test results and attendance figures. Within the context of higher education, Bainbridge, Gaitanidis and Hoult (2018) claim that many of the processes and systems of education work simply because educational professionals are 'tricked' into carrying out tasks that they do not agree with. Perhaps representing another iteration of Feltham's (2002) identification of power at a distance, or Edwards (1997) observation that power operates by seduction rather than coercion. But for education to be educational there is a duty not to accept the status quo (Biesta, 2015), but rather to resist and make decisions based on an understanding of educational purpose.

### ***Becoming an education leader***

Biesta (2017b) poses questions to educational leaders, asking what is their educational interest and if they are free to resist the distorted discourse of administration and management of indicators and test scores. As such, being an educational leader requires pursuing a particular educational purpose to make difficult pragmatic decisions within a complex educational environment. Such actions Biesta (2017b) claims are not driven by knowledge, rather a consideration about educational values.

The title of Biesta's (2012) article makes two claims: one to give teaching back to education while also recognising the 'disappearance' of the teacher, at least, the teacher who interrupts and brings something new to the learner. To reclaim and inhabit the role of an educational leader is not achieved by being seduced by governmental Continued Professional Development events or responses to Ofsted, parents and social media. It is, we suggest, to be found in innovative, pragmatic and professionally situated judgements that lie at the very heart of clinical support and supervision.

Just as Biesta's (2012 and 2017a) 'reclaimed' teachers are encouraged to interrupt their pupils with an encounter of something unfamiliar, we argue that clinical support and supervision has a similar function. The clinical supervisory encounter interrupts the accepted norms of professional learning, resisting the replication of powerful Foucauldian governmental discourses. Biesta (2013/2017a) and Bainbridge and West (2012) explain that for teaching to have educational purpose, the resistance that can accompany an encounter with

strangeness requires a response from the learner. This may have three possible outcomes: simplistic acceptance, rejection where nothing new emerges and, thirdly, the more difficult orientation towards 'virtuosity' where a risky and open dialogue is entered into, enabling the educational leader to make 'concrete situated judgements about what is educationally desirable' (Biesta, 2012, p45).

Therefore, the following discussion is grounded in the complex lives of headteachers, particularly acknowledging the tensions between the professional and personal and what it means to be an educational leader. There are questions about whether existing professional development opportunities available to headteachers are able to provide access to professional learning. Additionally, the important orientation towards care within our model of supervision acknowledges the need to take care of one's self in order to take care of others (Reid and Soan, 2018). It is our contention that the model of support and supervision presented here can move beyond being seduced into becoming an 'agent of the state', contributing to both innovative professional learning and well-being.

### ***Reclaiming educational leadership***

The supervision project and associated research has been carried out during a period of economic and professional upheaval where 91% of headteachers are unhappy with their professional lives, reporting a negative impact on their home lives, and making direct links between their leadership roles and negative mental health (Ipsos, 2015). Our conception of support and supervision is not to seek to impose an agenda on the supervisee, but rather to allow them to decide what is



to be discussed. Equally the intention is not to coach or mentor the supervisee towards mutually agreeable outcomes. In a sense the principles of acceptance and being non-judgmental offer headteachers the freedom to be interrupted by and stay with their own thoughts. Hence, the nature of our supervision encounter is to 'interrupt' the supervisee by providing a supportive environment allowing aspects of their role to be 'sat with' and thought about. Ultimately, the success of supervision can be accounted for by identifying the impact on how schools are led by particular individuals, such as those discussed in this paper.

James' evocative warehouse metaphor vividly portrays the manner in which supervision has enabled him to stay with and manage multiple complex tasks without the pile tumbling down. Supervision has interrupted James' thinking and he has moved from balancing multiple problems to being able to organise these into a more realistic manner. The busyness inherent in Clare's professional and personal life becomes a regular feature of her supervision, to the extent that she was 'forced' to confront whether she was the headteacher she wanted to be and if this was the position she really wanted. Christopher and Lisa were faced with acknowledging the stuck-ness of repetitive cycles of almost uncontrollable activity, but were able to think through ways in which to eradicate these exhausting patterns. Finally, it is not insignificant that all supervisees were able to use supervision to confront the personal and emotional aspects of their lives that previously had few outlets beyond a detrimental intrusion into family life.

The current heavily monitored school environment affords limited opportunity for headteachers to engage in open and risky dialogue where it is

possible to articulate what may more accurately represent particular educational values and individual feelings. We would argue that the process of supervision interrupts and facilitates what Biesta identifies as 'grown-up-ness' – where the desires of self and others can be thought about equally. A more mature educational leader emerges from supervision and is evident when Christopher acknowledges the evolution of his leadership and how he is now more ready to seek counsel from others. Clare has also moved from telling her staff to asking what they would do, allowing them to step out of their comfort zone and to make their own informed professional judgements. And James' genuinely democratic meeting processes have brought the wider school into a place where they too can make professional decisions. There is something powerful about the transformations reported here as they indicate a movement of impact from having an open dialogue in supervision, to a more open, mature, leadership strategy that in turn gives rise to a more responsible and mature workforce. In these examples it is as if supervision has given headteachers and their staff the permission to **reclaim** control and to make decisions about educational leadership and classroom practice that more accurately reflect their own educational values.

James' move to the development of a more mature workplace has resulted in staff meetings where *all* staff are invited to take part and he has re-organised the school day to ensure this can happen. The workplace has also become more caring, with gifts and flowers placed in the staffroom and a realisation that to be able to care for the pupils, the staff must be able to care for themselves. Clare reflected problems back to her staff encouraging them to come

up with their own novel solutions even if that involved the significantly risky admission of her own vulnerabilities.

The arena from which the supervision project emerged has been framed as one where the wide-ranging demands on professional life and their impact on personal life was becoming unsustainable. From our previous research (Reid and Soan, 2018) and the narratives presented above, we are confident that our model of support and supervision not only sustains senior leaders in schools, but also provides an opportunity to make meaningful professional decisions. Further far-reaching impact, beyond that of the individual head teacher, can also be confidently predicted as each narrative presented here offers an insight into transformations that include teaching and non-teaching staff, governors and families.

## **Conclusion**

Our conclusion begins with a return to the comparison between British miners washing off the dirt of their labours in the employer's time, and the role of clinical support and supervision to enable senior school leaders to leave some of the 'dirt' from their labours in supervision: while also thinking differently about their professional role. We re-affirm the restorative principle of taking care of the self in order to take care of others and call on those in positions of power, from school governors to politicians in charge of policy, to consider the lived experience of the beleaguered educational leaders encountered in our research. Such is the wide-ranging benefit of clinical support and supervision throughout a

school setting, we also contend our model to be cost-efficient in these cash-strapped times.

The small number of participants and relatively parochial geographical area in which the supervision and research took place, may raise some concern but consider that the issues raised by headteachers within supervision reflect those made by large cohort studies such as Ipsos (2015 and 2017). Indeed, the advantage of our model of supervision is the focus on each session being led by the supervisee and hence unique to their particular experience. We do not seek to offer up solutions to the educational dilemmas faced by senior school leaders, but only a mode of effective supervisory practice. Central to our rationale is the belief that school leaders, given a 'safe', supportive environment, are in the ideal position to make wise, professionally situated educational decisions.

Such professionally situated decisions invoke Biesta's (2013) identification of the need for virtuosity among teachers. Biesta considers the teacher defined by competencies who is unable to make professionally situated judgements as being a useless teacher. The virtuous teacher is one who makes educationally wise decisions grounded in an understanding of educational purpose. In this spirit we call for a virtuosity of school leadership – a practice of educational leadership where decision-making is informed by good educational judgments and not by standardisation and punitive accountability measures.

Finally, not only are we convinced by the cost-effectiveness and efficacy of our model, but also, we wish to highlight the moral obligation that those who design and manage educational systems must provide mechanisms to care for professionals carrying out educational labour. Clinical support and supervision

offers the possibility to promote a virtuosity of school leadership while meeting the moral obligation to care for school leaders and in doing so those in their care. Headteachers, senior school leaders, staff and pupils deserve no less.

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