The management of children and family social workers in England: reflecting upon the meaning and provision of support.

Abstract

Summary: In England in 2010, the then Children's Workforce Development Council introduced an initiative which aimed to support front line social work managers in the performance of their role. This article reflects on the way in which support was interpreted and implemented by the Children's Workforce Development Council and the local authorities that participated in the project, but also the relevance of the project for the social work profession in England at the time.

Findings: The construction and implementation of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' was negotiated, iterative and contingent. However, in keeping with the aims of the project, relational and reflective methods of developing supervisory skills were deployed by local authorities.

Applications: In acknowledging the limitations of techno-rational systems of management, this article offers an interpretive case study of a national initiative which encouraged investment in reflective and relational approaches to performance enhancement.   It highlights the interest in coaching, mentoring and action learning as developmental techniques, but also the significance of supervision to the identity of social work as a profession.

Key words: action learning; coaching; management; mentoring; social work; supervision.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, welfare provision in the United Kingdom in general and England in particular, has been reshaped by neoliberalism. With private sector services steadily replacing those previously provided directly by the state, both central and local government have deployed techno-rational

methods of management as a means of prescribing their quantity and quality (Harlow 2000; Harlow 2003; Harlow *et al*. 2012; Harris 2003; James 2004). In general, these managerialist attempts to ensure quality, as well as reduce risk within children's services, have increased bureaucracy (particularly by means of information and communication technologies) and decreased professional autonomy (Broadhurst *et al.* 2010; Wastell *et al*. 2010). Furthermore, the organizational reconfiguration that aims to encourage inter-professionalism amongst all children and family practitioners, has led to the end of Social Services Departments and the separation of social workers from their adult focussed counterparts. In some instances these new organizational configurations have led to corporate management and the specific professional needs of social workers going unaddressed.

This organization and managerial context, together with a focus on failures in safeguarding the lives of children (see for example, Garboden 2008; Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board 2009 and Laming 2009), has undermined the status and confidence of children and families social workers in England.   With social work described as 'beleaguered' (Social Work Task Force 2009), the problem of recruiting and retaining practitioners that was noted almost a decade earlier (Harlow 2004) has become an increasing challenge (Local Government Association Group 2009). The creation of the Social Work Task Force (which reported in 2009) and Professor Munro's review of child protection (whose reports

were published in 2010 and 2011) were initial steps towards the resolution of difficulties and the revitalizing of the profession. The retrieval of the professional supervision of social workers, as opposed to corporate techno-rational or rational – objectivist management, was highlighted as an important component of this process. This article draws attention to an initiative that occurred in England and was intended to bolster this development. This initiative, named and mounted by the Children's Workforce Development Council, was the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' : front line managers being those responsible for providing supervision to practitioners.

This article emerges from, rather than reports on, a process evaluation (see Robson 2011) of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project'. It constitutes a retrospective reflection on the meaning of 'support' that was central to this initiative and to the way in which it was to be implemented by the organizations involved. By examining the organizational intentions and practices in the light of current debates, an interpretive case study will be offered that illustrates one particular aspect of social work development in England at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

According to Thomas (2011: 9) 'The case study is not a method in itself. Rather, it is a focus and the focus is on one thing, looked at in depth and from many angles'. The 'one thing' that is being looked at here, is the

way in which 'support' to front line managers was constructed by the Children's Workforce Development Council, and implemented by local authorities. Its significance to social work in England at the time of its implementation is then reflected and commented upon. Insights emerging from this reflection may contribute to wider debates on the management of children and families services as well as challenges facing social work in neoliberal contexts in general. The article will first describe and highlight the significance of supervision, then the organizational initiation of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project'. Following this, the evaluation of the initiative will be recounted. The way in which the support was interpreted and mobilized by the participating organizations will then be presented. Finally, a discussion of these interpretations in the light of the social and organizational context will conclude the article.

The supervision of social work practitioners

According to Kadushin and Harkness (2002) the supervision of social work is as old as social work itself. From the origins of social work in the late nineteenth century, supervision has been the mechanism by which practitioners are: kept in touch with the organizational aims of their employers; enabled to develop their professional competence; and supported to undertake the emotionally difficult aspects of their work. More recently, Morrison (2006) has described supervision in terms of four functions: to encourage good performance; to facilitate professional development; to provide restorative support; to mediate between the

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practitioner and the employing organization (Morrison 2006: 32). Morrison's theoretical contribution has been taken up in England by those responsible for developing the performance of supervision (see below). The British Association of Social Workers has produced a national policy on the provision of quality supervision (see The Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee 2011) and the Social Care Institute for Excellence has published a supervision briefing article (see Carpenter *et al*. (2012). In England and in social work communities elsewhere, there appears to be a strong level of interest in the nature and quality of supervision (see for example, Beddoe 2010; Busse 2009; Ingram 2013; Noble and Irwin 2009; Tsui 2005; and Yürür and Sarikaya 2012). Lawlor (2013) describes an interactional model of supervision which might also be understood as relational and reflective:

> In this model of interactional supervision, the instrument is the supervisor. By emphasising the interactional nature of the supervisory process, it is seen that supervision is ... a relationship of supervisor and supervisee. The quality of the relationship provides an opportunity for thinking and is the key condition for effective supervision. This then leads to thoughtful practice (Lawlor 2013: 181).

The 'Support to Front Line Managers Project'.

The then Children's Workforce Development Council (an English organization funded by the government, but dismantled in 2012) aimed to cultivate the quality of children's services by enhancing the performance of all relevant staff members, including social workers and their managers. This organization had already introduced standards of good practice in supervision by means of the model developed by Morrison (see above and Children's Workforce Development Council 2008), and trained front line managers in its use. According to members of the Children's Workforce Development Council, there was also an anticipation of the recommendations that would be made in the report of the Social Work Task Force (2009). In consequence, by means of an independent advisor, the organization surveyed the developmental requirements of front line managers employed in local authorities and in 2009 held a consultative event. This event enabled representatives of the local authorities (usually managers) to comment on the preliminary ideas for providing support.

Overall, there was an opportunity for each of the 152 local authorities in England to participate in the project and 86 expressed an interest. On receipt of suitable proposals and progress reports the Children's Workforce Development Council made funding available. All interested local authorities received funding. An independent training organization was recruited by the Children's Workforce Development Council to monitor the implementation of the project and to share electronically across England exemplars of good practice. An opportunity to undertake a desk-based evaluation of the project was made known by the Children's Workforce Development Council. The author and two colleagues submitted a

proposal that was accepted. The evaluation took place between January and March 2011. The report was published on-line in 2011 (Harlow *et al.* 2011).

Evaluating the 'Support to Front Line Manager's Project'

The aims of the evaluation were as follows: to identify the local authorities' aim and plans for the project; to identify how projects have been implemented; and to identify the local authorities' plans for embedding the project. In essence, the evaluation aimed to find out how the project was operating. Methodologically, this constituted a process evaluation:

> Process evaluation is concerned with answering a how, or 'what is going on' question. It concerns the systematic observation and study of what actually occurs in the programme, intervention, or whatever is being evaluated (Robson 2011: 181).

 As indicated above, the Children's Workforce Development Council provided the methodological parameters for the evaluation. Given the pressures on the local authorities, and 'beleaguered' nature of children's services, there was a strong desire to avoid researcher intrusion and a desk-based analysis of documents was stipulated. The documents in question were the administrative forms that had been constructed and circulated by the Children's Workforce Development Council: that is, the

project proposals and progress reports that had been submitted by the participating local authorities. Of the 86 local authorities that participated in the project, there were administrative forms available for the evaluation from 81. In addition, the monitoring role of the independent training agency had given rise to some completed quality assurance questionnaires (48) and notes of telephone conversations (12). Although not all of these documents were available for all 81 participating local authorities, 164 documents were examined in total.   In order to address the aims of the project, and make use of all of the documents available, the researchers had proposed a quantitative content analysis:

> Content analysis is an approach to the analysis of documents and texts (which may be printed or visual) that seek to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner. It is a very flexible method that can be applied to a variety of different media. In a sense, it is not a research method in that it is an approach to the analysis of documents and texts rather than a means of generating data. However, it is usually treated as a research method because of its distinctive approach to analysis (Bryman 2008: 274).

What is counted in a content analysis is determined by the research question: in this instance, the researchers wanted to identify and quantify data relating to the local authorities' proposals for offering support, the mechanisms by which the support would be provided, who would receive

it and the means by which it would be embedded for the future.   In keeping with the principles of content analysis, the researchers established a coding scheme. This was developed and piloted in relation to sets of documents from 12 local authorities that had been randomly selected from the total. Two researchers worked on this task and agreed the resulting scheme that was applied across all sets of documents.   A coding manual was not considered necessary as the same researcher (the author) took sole responsibility for the scheme's application: put another way, this arrangement facilitated a high degree of consistency of the analysis across all of the documents.   By means of this exercise, statistical data were generated.

The strength of quantitative content analysis is that it provides a 'big picture': trends, patterns and absences are discernible across a large number of documents or texts (Deacon 2012: 247). However, the method 'skates over complex processes of meaning making within texts: the latent levels of form and meaning' (Deacon 2012: 247). In addition to this general methodological weakness, the documentary data made available were limited in quality (see below). In order to achieve a greater appreciation of the planning for and implementation of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project', researchers needed to rely more heavily on background information than had been originally anticipated.   In consequence, a researcher accompanied the representative of the training organization when site visits were made: site visits were made to three

English local authorities. These site visits consisted of a meeting with personnel who had held responsibility for the implementation of the project. Furthermore, in an attempt to 'make sense' of the documents, two telephone interviews were held: one was held with a member of the Children's Workforce Development Council and one with a member of the training organization. Notes were taken during both.   Finally, the interpretation of the documents, site visits, and telephone interviews was assisted by the reading of the written guidance issued to the local authorities, as well as on-going informal conversations with members of the Children's Workforce Development Council and the training organization. In summary, in order to render the evaluation more robust, the researchers extended their data inclusion, data gathering and analysis beyond the remit originally established by the commissioners.

The limitations of the evaluation of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' are as follows: the documentary returns, questionnaires and notes were written in free text format, which meant that their content was wide ranging, highly variable and at times omitting of expected information. In consequence, coding required a high level of interpretation on the part of the researcher. Furthermore, the sample of local authorities visited was not only small, but was not chosen by the evaluators: the sample consisted of examples of practice that the training organization intended to share with other authorities.   Despite these limitations, the methodological approach may be considered trustworthy as all three researchers agreed the interpretations made, participants in the site visit meetings agreed the content of the report, and the evaluation

commissioners welcomed it as a sound reflection of the Project. Finally, the report was subjected to independent review before it was published.

In terms of ethical protocols, an application for approval was not submitted prior to the start of the evaluation on the grounds that it was not required for a desk-based evaluation, and approval was sought from a relevant University committee at a later point. However, principles of ethical practice were applied from the outset. In order to ensure confidentiality, all documents and notes of verbal communications were stored in a locked filing cabinet.   There was no need to construct an information leaflet about the evaluation as all of the verbal communications involved professionals who were already familiar with the Support to Front Line Managers project, the evaluation and the researchers' role. These professionals included: the commissioners of the evaluation; representatives of the training organization that was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the project; and personnel in local authorities whose implementation of the project was considered exemplary.   At the start of the telephone interviews, respondents were advised that: notes would be taken; principles of confidentiality would apply; and that the interview could be terminated at any point.   As indicated above, representatives of the organizations involved in the evaluation agreed with the interpretations made, and the content of the report was approved before it was published.

Interpreting and implementing support for front line managers

This section of the article will describe the interpretations of support that were considered, and eventually adopted by the Children's Workforce Development Council and then the interpretations that were implemented by the local authorities.

The Children's Workforce Development Council and the interpretations of support

On the basis of the survey of need that was carried out by the independent advisor (see above), the Children's Workforce Development Council initially interpreted support for front line managers as the provision of coaching and mentoring. Following the consultations with the local authorities, this was extended to include supportive provision that was already underway.   On inviting proposals the Children's Workforce Development Council issued guidance on the schemes of support that would be funded. These included:

> *schemes [that]focus on the management and supervision of staff in areas such as supervision, reflective practice, team dynamics, managing risk, decision making, in a specifically social work context rather than corporate management programmes designed to support 'generic' management skills*

schemes [that]provide mentoring and/or coaching for social work

front line or team managers (Written guidance provided to local

authorities by the Children's Workforce Development Council quoted

in Harlow *et al.* 2011:13)

In addition, the Children's Workforce Development Council produced

definitions of mentoring and coaching (though were unclear about the

extent of their circulation). When asked, the training organization

representative said that support consisted of:

... anything that is not process driven. Not accountability,

inspection [it is] space to stop, think and reflect. It is about

considered practice. (...) In the information documents circulated by

CWDC [Children's Workforce Development Council], it was clear that

support meant action learning sets, coaching and mentoring and

peer support (Representative of the training organization, quoted in

Harlow, *et al*. 2011:12)*.*

The local authorities and the interpretation and implementation of support

From all of the data gathered, there are four main themes that are of

interest here: firstly, the dominance of educational opportunities as a

means of providing support, secondly, the construction of coaching and

mentoring as a means of support, thirdly, the blurring of terms and

blending of methods provided, and finally, the significance of the locale. Each one of these themes will be addressed in turn.

The dominance of educational opportunities as a means of providing support

From the data it was possible to conclude that the local authorities were most enthusiastic about the supportive value of education. Put another way, the provision of educational opportunities were the most popular method of providing support to front line managers. Usually this meant facilitating the participation of front line managers in action learning sets. The term 'action learning' may be used in a variety of ways, but there is an emphasis on 'action as a continuous process of learning and reflection, where students learn from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their experiences' (Taylor 1996:82 referring to the work of McGill and Beaty 1993). In addition to action learning sets, the range of educational opportunities planned for front line managers included workshops, taught courses provided by universities or bespoke training courses; e-learning packages; conference attendance; or shadowing colleagues. Approximately half of the local authorities (43 in number) indicated that only one form of education would be provided, whilst the other half intended to provide a number of forms, sometimes in an integrated manner.

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Coaching and mentoring as a means of providing support

Definitions of coaching and mentoring were provided by the Children's Workforce Development Council that complied with the general principle that a mentor is an experienced colleague who can offer assistance while a coach is an organizationally external person who works to facilitate the improvement of role performance (see Foster-Turner 2006 and Holroyd and Field 2012). In keeping with the terms of the funding, coaching and mentoring were deployed as methods of providing front line managers with support. There are different theoretical foundations and practical approaches to mentoring and coaching (see for example, Bluckert 2006; Kelly 2001; Newton *et al*. 2006; and Peltier 2001), but the local authorities did not always specify what kind of coaching or mentoring, or what kind of techniques were to be deployed. Indeed, the terms coaching and mentoring appeared to have been blurred in their application (see below).

The blurring of terms and blending of methods of support provided

The analysis of the data indicated that the local authorities blurred the terms coaching and mentoring. The local authorities appeared to use the terms coaching and mentoring interchangeably. The relatively limited reference to the difference between coaching and mentoring may be because the definitions drafted by the Children's Workforce Development Council did not reach their intended audience (a possibility suggested by a

representative of Children's Workforce Development Council) or because any suggestion of difference was not appreciated or was disregarded. Despite the differences articulated in the literature by Foster-Turner (2006) and Holroyd and Field (2012), Garvey *et al*. (2009) argue that swapping between terms and deploying a similar meaning to each is not unusual. Indeed, following a review of the literature and historical development of each, Garvey *et al.* conclude that coaching and mentoring are 'essentially the same in nature' (Garvey *et al*. 2009:27): the fundamental features of both coaching and mentoring are the development of an interpersonal relationship that uses dialogue and reflection as a means of developing occupational or professional skill, with a view to the improvement in role performance.

There was also a blurring between the education provided and coaching. For example, one local authority reported that, 'From initial feedback the approach of Action Learning as a way of providing coaching and peer support is being well received by recipients' (Written report provided by a local authority quoted in Harlow *et al.* 2011:17). In this instance, the coaching appears to be informal and provided by peers as they participated in an action learning set. On occasion, local authorities claimed to be offering coaching to front line managers, but on closer reading of the documents, it appeared as though front line managers were attending courses on coaching. The provision was therefore educational in content. Put another way, in some instances, rather than front line managers being coached themselves, they were being trained in coaching techniques that they could use when supervising social work practitioners.

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However, coaching courses often include experiential components that provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on their own work.

In addition to the blurring, there was also a blending of components that were deemed supportive. For example, one local authority built on a partnership with the local University, and a social work specific coaching and mentoring taught module was constructed. Successful completion enabled participants to earn credits which would count towards a postgraduate award. Importantly, participants of the programme were provided with mentors and were required to maintain a reflective learning journal (Harlow *et al.* 2011).

The significance of the locale

Although the Children's Workforce Development Council specified the schemes of support that might be offered, and compliance was encouraged by the monitoring role of the training organization, the particularities of the local authority influenced the way in which support was interpreted and delivered. In the example of the local authority provided above, organizational networks were crucial: it was the on-going positive relationship with the local university that led to the shape and nature of the provision.   Similarly, internal influences such as the functioning and stability of the senior management team might have impacted upon the design of the scheme. For example, in the case of one particular local authority, personnel had experienced a difficult phase that

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was associated with organizational change. The project budget was used to finance development days that were facilitated by an independent organizational consultant. These days '...allowed the Senior Management Team time and space to think about front line managers and the numerous pressures placed upon them' (Comment made by a Senior Manager quoted in Harlow *et al.* 2011:28). This opportunity to reflect led to the creation of the new post of Advanced Social Work Practitioner: a post intended to relieve front line managers of some of their day-to-day work and pressure.

Concluding discussion

The practice of supervision has been a distinctive component of social work, and for some at least, social work's greatest contribution to the helping professions (see Davys and Beddoe 2010:11).   In the past, it was expected that a social worker would be supervised by a manager who held a social work qualification and had practice experience. Over recent times, however, this arrangement has been in jeopardy in local authorities that had pursued a corporate approach to line management: ideas of flexibility, inter-disciplinarity and the common capabilities of the children's workforce, were discouraging profession specific management. Furthermore, the practice of supervision was giving way to forms of performance management that emphasised the achievement of targets

within timeframes at the expense of relationship-based reflection. Wastell
et al. (2010) have illustrated the way in which information and
communication technologies have been harnessed to manage
performance in such a way as to reduce the autonomy of practitioners,
their opportunity to 'think' and their sense of reward from undertaking the
work.   Whilst front line management has become increasingly
mechanistic, the emphasis on external regulation such as inspection,
monitoring and audit means that senior managers have lost sight of the
uncertainty, complexity and messiness of human problems and the
implications of this for practice and practitioners. Systems of
management therefore, have not been taking into account the experience
and needs of practitioners, and arguably there have been many
detrimental consequences for all individuals concerned: overall, according
to Cooper and Lousada (2005) this state of affairs has raised the anxiety
of the workforce and eroded its confidence in its foundations of
knowledge:

> Professional self-discipline or self-regulation has been significantly
> re-cast in the form of externally authorized social surveillance;
> professional self-examination and an ethos of learning from
> experience transmuted into one of 'transparent' public audit of
> practices and the systems shaping practice; professional
> development through creative struggle within a dialectic of ideas,
> understanding of practice experience, refashioned in the direction of
> evidence-based practice (Cooper and Lousada 2005: 67).

The 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' was a small, initial step towards creating change. The construction of the project was iterative: that is, the Children's Workforce Development Council consulted on the topic, made proposals, consulted again, and then acted on the revisions. Local authorities were funded on their compliance with the guidance issued by the Children's Workforce Development Council, and their activity was monitored. The schemes of support that were introduced were therefore generally similar, but varied in their specificity and were reflective of the local context. Overall therefore, the construction and implementation of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' was negotiated at the start and contingent at the point of implementation. Although many local authorities provided coaching and/or mentoring as a means of supporting front line managers there was a preference for providing educational opportunities. The local authorities' preference for providing educational opportunities may result from a relative lack of familiarity with coaching and mentoring, but also pragmatism: as indicated above, the option of building on existing provision was negotiated when the project was constructed, and existing provision may have been educational.   Education has been emphasised over recent decades as a means of improving social work services. This approach is compatible with the neoliberal context because it usually encourages the understanding of human subjectivity in terms of cognitive rationality at the expense of emotional and relational considerations (Froggett 2002). A practitioner's (required) registration with the Health and Care Professions

Council (previously with the recently dismantled General Social Care Council) requires continual professional development, which usually means on-going education. In response to developmental requirements, Universities have provided post-qualification, certificated taught programmes which have been accessed by local authorities (see Blewett 2011). Although recently reconfigured, post-qualifying education will continue. Importantly however, the 'Support to Front Line Managers' project encouraged forms of learning that were relational and reflective in their approach (such as coaching, mentoring and action learning). Unsurprisingly, given the conditions of the funding and the monitoring of the project, this approach was implemented in general, albeit in a variety of guises. The 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' therefore encouraged relational and reflective methods of preparing front line managers to undertake relational and reflective supervision with social work practitioners (see Harlow 2013).

The 'support' being made available to front line managers was assistance or help in the performance of their role: with an emphasis on skill development, the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' was a form of performance management. However, it was a form of performance management that was intended to have a closer or more authentic connection with the needs of front line managers and practitioners. By foregrounding supervision, the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project' was retrieving a component of practice that was integral to a professional identity that had become fragile and in need of bolstering (Munro 2010 and 2011). Despite the changes that have followed the reviews of

professional social work in England, and the 'success' or otherwise of the 'Support to Front Line Managers Project', the wider economic, political and organizational context means that retrieving supervision and sustaining the identity and confidence of professional social work in England constitutes an on-going and substantial challenge.

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