

Reflective Supervision in Oldham: An Evaluation Report

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This paper reports findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of reflective supervision in Oldham, as funded by the Oldham Opportunity Area. Key messages are:

- The reflective supervision process has sharpened participants' focus on their own mental wellbeing, and the need to proactively work on this, to support their professional output. This has important ramifications for work-life balance and managing workload.
- Reflective supervision has been crucial in re-energising and empowering participants, in ways that gives them greater self-awareness and self-confidence. This might be crucial in dealing with enduring issues around teacher retention.
- Participants have a good understanding of their colleagues needs and feel better equipped to support them, and this has an impact on practitioner confidence and feelings of professional security.

Despite these clear points of impact, there remain, however, structural barriers that continually threaten participants' wellbeing and motivation in school, and it may be that these can only be reduced through a more collective and widespread adoption of the principles of reflective supervision. This then raises two associated challenges:

- 1) How can models be developed to impact all staff across a school community, as well as targeting groups such as early career teachers?
- 2) How can models be developed that take account of the community context, local families, and pupils?

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION: GENERAL OVERVIEW

Described as “a relationship-based supervisory approach that supports various models of relationship-based service delivery” (Heffron & Murch, 2010, p. 5), reflective supervision is a tool – routinely used in social work and medicine - that enables professionals to take stock of, and reflect upon, the diverse challenges they face in their professional lives (Parlakian, 2002; as cited in Watson et al., 2014, p. 3).

In practice, this process tends to entail a series of supervisory meetings between a trained supervisor and a practitioner (referred to as a supervisee). In these supervisory meetings, a confidential space is created (See Care Quality Commission 2013), where supervisees can explore their own, and others' emotional reactions to professional situations in the moment, also considering how these might affect their, and others', thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and actions (Tomlin & Viehweg, 2016).

In this regard, reflective supervision has been found to support social and emotional well-being, supportive relationships, emotional resilience, cognitive flexibility, and coping skills, in the workplace, by focussing on three key features of professional life, (i) one's own perspectives, (ii) other perspectives (of clients or colleagues), and (iii) the broader professional environment or context (Watson et al., 2014). There is also some evidence (see Care Quality Commission 2013) to suggest that supervision might contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction, as well as improved staff retention.

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION IN OLDHAM

In July 2019, the Oldham Schools and Colleges Staff Wellbeing Index (Oldham Council 2019) reported high levels of stress among education-related professionals, as well as concerns around workload and work-life balance. As such, 52% of respondents cited that they had considered leaving their profession in the twelve months prior to the survey. This, coupled with qualitative intelligence gathered by Oldham Council's Mental Health in Education team that staff wellbeing in local schools was a concern, resulted in a strategic focus on ways of developing a local reflective supervision model to (i) support local school leaders, and (ii) in doing so enable these leaders to better support their staff and students. In this regard, the programme evaluated in this report can be understood as a pilot of school-based reflective supervision across one local authority.

The Oldham reflective supervision programme (known as the Responsive Schools programme locally), funded by the Oldham Opportunity Area and led by Intraquest, a local Community Interest Company, began in September 2019 with two main strands of activity.

First, a series of workshops to train 104 education-related staff to deliver reflective supervision in their settings. This was put on hold in March 2020 due to the Covid 19 pandemic, and then continued online as a blended learning model.

Second, 62 school leaders or staff with safeguarding / pastoral responsibility (over 47 education settings) were offered a series (up to a maximum of 8 in one academic year) of one-to-one reflective supervision sessions with an external, experienced supervisor from Intraquest. The first cohort began in September 2019, and some continued into the 2020/21 academic year. A smaller second cohort of supervisees began receiving supervision in September 2020.

This evaluation largely focuses on the second of these two strands of activity, i.e. the experiences of supervisees who have received a series of one-to-one supervision sessions.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This evaluation project began in March 2020 and was then immediately put on hold due to the Covid 19 pandemic. It was revisited in November 2020, and data collection began in April 2021.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the School of Education, Environment and Development Ethics Committee at the University of Manchester, and all research activities adhered to the required norms. As such, all names in the following sections are pseudonyms.

There were two phases to this data collection, as outlined below:

Phase 1

In this first phase, our overarching aim was to design and administer a short survey to explore participants' experiences of the reflective supervision process. Survey design and administration took place between February and June 2021. The survey consisted of four questions that covered topics around engagement (question 1), perceptions of impact of the reflective supervision on both the self and others (question 2), as well as open-ended questions to explore personal experiences more expansively (questions 3 and 4). For question 2, participants were asked to reflect upon the period since their last supervision session and to respond to 12 statements. Statements 1-4 focus upon participants' own mental wellbeing, statements 5-10 focus upon participants' professional practice, and statements 11-12 focus upon relationships with wider colleagues. These broad categories

reflect the thematic structure of the reflective supervision model used in Oldham. Although this survey has been designed to be completed by participants at the start, middle and end of the reflective supervision process, for this evaluation - and given the enduring constraints on participants due to Covid 19 - it was only administered once, and as such this evaluation project can be considered a pilot for the survey measure itself.

All 60 practitioners following Oldham’s reflective supervision model were invited to participate in this evaluation, by being emailed a link to an anonymous online survey on the Qualtrics platform. A total of 47 of these practitioners completed the survey – 78% of the practitioners following the reflective supervision model. 33 of these respondents – 70% of the sample - had experienced 4 or more sessions of supervision (see Table 1):

| # of Sessions (up to a maximum of 8) | Participants |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1 | 3 |
| 2 | 7 |
| 3 | 4 |
| 4 | 11 |
| 5 | 9 |
| 6 | 3 |
| 7 | 0 |
| 8 | 10 |
| | Total: 47 |

Table 1: Numbers of sessions of Reflective Supervision experienced by participants

Descriptive data analysis was used for questions 1 and 2. For the open-ended questions (3 and 4), a qualitative analysis was conducted that took an inductive approach to identifying themes (Miles et al., 2020).

Phase 2

To explore key themes developed within the survey, we conducted a series of three interviews with school leaders who have each taken part in the reflective supervision process. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and explored:

- ◆ What was your experience of the reflective supervision sessions?
- ◆ What impact have the supervisions had on you, your practice and your school?
- ◆ What has the approach enabled you to do that you might not otherwise have been able to?
- ◆ How might any identified impact feed back into future activity, strategically and operationally?

Sampling was through self-selection, following mail communication by Intraquest to programme participants. All interview data were thematically analysed.

The small-scale nature of this research, as well as the self-selective sampling, strategy limits the extent to which generalisations can be made; although the level of detail captured within the study mean that reliability is still possible. It should be emphasised however that this

scoping work was designed to feed into a broader case study and should therefore be seen as early, exploratory qualitative work that might feed into a wider, composite picture. The following section will now report key messages arising out of the study.

FINDINGS

Key Message 1: The reflective supervision process has sharpened participants' focus on their own mental wellbeing, and the need to proactively work on this, to support their professional output.

41 participants felt that, in the period since their last supervision session, they had been proactive in taking care of their own emotional wellbeing, with 22 reporting this as often and 19 as very often. This appears connected to the supervision sessions enabling them a release from the sustained tension that they navigate in their professional lives, and an opportunity to re-engage with themselves in a structured, guided space.

- ◆ Enabled me to come up for breath - re engage with self
- ◆ I have found my sessions ... very useful, someone independent to let off steam to, someone to talk to that has a different perspective on things and is able to change the way in which I look at things
- ◆ Excellent opportunity to offload and reflect on variables that impact performance and feelings

Data also suggest that participants are better able to separate their personal life from their professional life through the supervision process. Results from the survey suggest that 33 participants felt that they had been able to maintain a healthy work-life balance, with 25 reporting this as often and 8 as very often. For some, this has resulted in more practical ways of working that keep the personal and professional separate, whereas for others a sharpened focus on their own personal needs has improved participants emotional wellbeing and this in turn has enabled participants to feel better equipped to deal with diverse professional challenges.

- ◆ *Changes to work diary to avoid conflict with own need and school needs.*
- ◆ *Reflective supervision has given me the space to look after myself more meaning I can do my job better. I would like to be able to have it more often.*
- ◆ *Whilst the sessions have help me strengthen my practice in a professional setting, I've found the benefit of these sessions has been incredible for me in my personal life. The insights I have gained into my own thinking and beliefs about myself have helped me to become more comfortable 'just being me' and leading a more congruent personal life.*
- ◆ *Reflective supervision has given me the space to look after myself more meaning I can do my job better. I would like to be able to have it more often.*

Despite this, work is still a site of tension and potential conflict for many participants with 24 participants reporting that they feel peaceful at work only some of the time, and 4 participants experience this only rarely. While participants feel better able to prioritise their emotional wellbeing and to separate this from their day-to-day work in ways that have professional impact, workplace tensions contribute to a difficult working environment.

Carla's Story

A safeguarding lead and SENco in a primary school, Carla has received reflective supervision since September 2020. Being the everyday point of contact for children and their families, often in difficulty or in challenging circumstances, can be an enormous strain on Carla. Add to this the combined pressures of supporting children and families during the Covid 19 pandemic and grappling with difficult relationships with some colleagues, Carla describes herself as 'emotionally exhausted'. For her, reflective supervision has been central to her ability to continue do her job in the face of such demands:

"This year, I wouldn't be here without reflective supervision. It's been such a tricky year. The support has been phenomenal...I would have been off sick or I wouldn't have managed to continue in this role as Safeguarding Lead without reflective supervision."

For Carla, reflective supervision has enabled her to make sense of the diverse pressures professionally, and separate the personal from the professional. She values the time that she gets to spend with her supervisor, who is at once an objective, neutral outsider to the educational environment in which Carla is working, but who understands the contextual dynamics and constraints. The liminal space that the supervisor occupies allows Carla to reflect upon her own mindset, sources of stress, professional or personal difficulties, as well as behaviours and relationships, while also developing her own practical strategies to cope; it is both nurturing and supportive, but pragmatic and 'down to earth, realistic'. The time spent in supervision sessions has been pivotal to Carla's mental health and wellbeing, allowing to unload and 'park' issues that cause her stress. For her, it is the obvious solution to issues around retention, recruitment, and a happy and healthy workforce:

"Reflective Supervision is really important...I would pay for it if it doesn't continue to be funded. It's about time we started taking care of teachers' mental health and wellbeing. This is how to do it. I don't feel like a teacher anymore...I am dealing with issues around housing, mental health and child protection rather than teaching. Some of these things can be really difficult, so for me reflective supervision is key."

Carla's story demonstrates the complexities, challenges and pressures that many education professionals experience, while there is no doubt that reflective supervision has been an essential component of her ability to do her job over the past twelve months, there is nonetheless a sense that workplace challenges continue to threaten her wellbeing. This raises key questions as to how future reflective supervision models might be used within whole school approaches to support a fully reflective community, environment and ethos.

Key Message 2: Reflective supervision has been crucial in re-energising and empowering participants, in ways that gives them greater self-awareness and self-confidence.

42 participants report feeling more confident professionally since their last supervision, with 17 citing this as very often and 25 as often. In this sense, the process encourages participants to take a more positive outlook to challenges, in ways that enable participants to better determine what they can control, and what they can not, which has in turn enabled a greater humility and willingness to turn to other sources of support for help and guidance, where and if necessary. In addition to shifting participants' attitudes and beliefs, the sessions also provide some concrete strategies that participants can actively test out in practice in-between supervisions. Having a potential toolkit of strategies at their disposal appears to be empowering for participants, and eases the burden of having to continually come up with solutions themselves.

- ◆ Reflective supervision has enabled me to be more self-aware and be able to evaluate situation of which I can control and not worry about things that are not in my control.
- ◆ My last supervision session dealt with some very tricky work issues, I left equipped with a new outlook and lots of ideas to try and strategies to use. I have had a positive mindset. It was invaluable, how I felt going in the session, to coming out, I was a different person. Everyone should have some form of supervision!

This notion of a positive mind-set appears to be a crucial ingredient in enabling participants to navigate the day-to-day challenges of being a senior leader in a school context. In this sense, participants appear to leave sessions with a sense of resilience and optimism.

Peter's Story

Peter is Vice Principal in a multi-academy trust, and has been involved with the reflective supervision project since September 2020, when he was sent a flyer from the Local Authority. Initially his interest was around supporting his staff and using reflective supervision to support positive inter-staff conversations, but actually it has been pivotal for him in understanding and managing his own individualised responses to stress.

"I know now that I create my own stress, or magnify the stress, by focussing on the gap between where things are and where I want them to be...I dwell on that, I ruminate...reflective supervision helps me understand this, make changes to avoid this negativity and supports a more positive mind-set. That has a ripple effect on how I approach everything as a senior leader, a parent and a husband, I'm giving the vibe of someone calm, in control and mindful and this has an effect at home and in the workplace...and it's massive really."

The key to this process of making sense of one's own mind-set and behaviour patterns is the space created through reflective supervision, where there is no judgement but there is a sense of pragmatic challenge:

"She (the supervisor) creates a space where you're allowed to be vulnerable. There's no judgement, but it's also challenging. She mirrors back your words, and allows you to see what you don't see. She gives you legitimacy."

The effects of reflective supervision on Peter have been profound, and moving into the new school year, he has plans to encourage other senior leaders in his trust to take up reflective supervision to feed into a whole school reflection model, and ultimately develop a positive, 'intrinsically motivated workforce' fuelled by potential. In his view, the outcomes of a more whole school approach to supervision could be significant.

"It (reflective supervision) unlocks people's potential. If we have got staff reflecting on their wellbeing, they are in a better place to support pupils. If you're going to invest in one area, this (reflective supervision) is it."

Peter's story demonstrates the deep personal impact that reflective supervision can have on shifting one's mind-set, through an acknowledgment and understanding of one's own patterns of behaviour and responses to stress. His final quotation further reinforces the importance of cascading reflective supervision models across the school community to ensure that all staff and students receive the wellbeing benefits that they have to offer.

Key Message 3: Participants have a good understanding of their colleagues needs and felt better equipped to support them.

45 participants report feeling more aware of colleagues' needs and better equipped to support them, with 20 citing this as very often and 25 as often.

- ◆ *The sessions have been invaluable. They have helped me to unpick situations and relationships with colleagues. From this I building a toolkit to support me navigate the work place and best support my team and myself on a day to day basis.*
- ◆ *Reflective Supervision has had a profound, life changing impact not only for me but also for my colleagues around me.*
- ◆ *Reflective supervision has given me the opportunity to reflect on my practice. Encouraged me to ask for guidance and I have felt more equipped to support my colleagues when then they have approached me for support.*

Given that most participants in this programme are school leaders with responsibility for leading and managing groups of colleagues, this increased sense of understanding and support could be pivotal in building and sustaining a school environment underpinned by trust, mutuality and collaboration. It also raises pertinent questions about how reflective supervision might be used to support, and ultimately retain in the profession, early career teachers.

Lindsay's Story

Lindsay has worked in the same school, as Safeguarding Lead, for almost twenty years, and has never had any form of supervision. In truth, she has never wanted to participate in supervision and describes herself as initially sceptical, only signing up to the programme in September 2019 with a view to being trained to conduct supervisions with colleagues (a strand of activity that was put on hold due to Covid 19 restrictions).

For Lindsay, the benefits of reflective supervision are numerable. Firstly (and as linked to Key Message 1) , she is better able to manage professional issues, pragmatically and in a way that prevents her from taking professional problems into her personal time:

“I have new ideas of ways to deal with complex issues and situations, ways of unloading issues rather than describing and containing them. It gives me new strategies to try.”

Perhaps most crucially, this space to reflect and discuss has enabled her to understand, and hence collaborate more fully with, colleagues in ways that are productive, and underpinned by trust and mutuality. This has been especially beneficial when dealing with complex and emotive issues, such as pupil exclusions and multi-agency working.

“Reflective supervision has given me a better understanding of other people's points of view, how to respond productively and how to accept decisions that don't fit with what I would like.”

She particularly notes a strengthened relationship with her Headteacher through improved 'mutual understanding', which in turn has enabled a renewed sense of confidence and professional security in Lindsay.

Lindsay's story demonstrates the potential of reflective supervision to shift understandings around colleagues and their responses to events and decision-making, even where there is a longstanding professional relationship. The notion that this might grant an individual a greater sense of professional security and confidence is perhaps crucial to sustained issues around teacher recruitment and retention, and has potentially significant ramifications for the support of early career teachers.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

There is no doubt that Oldham's reflective supervision model has had a considerable impact on participants, over a relatively short period of time, enabling participants to separate the personal and professional, encouraging more positive mind-sets and facilitating stronger relationships with colleagues. Much important work has laid strong foundations and there is much that can now be valuably built upon if the model is to be further developed.

Moving forward, a key challenge will be to explore how supervision models might be used across whole schools level to improve the wider environment, culture and ethos. Although it is clear that individual participants have benefitted from the supervision process and this has enabled them to manage professional issues productively and positively, there remain structural barriers that continually threaten their wellbeing and motivation and it may be that these can only be reduced through a more collective and widespread adoption of the principles of reflective supervision. This then raises two associated challenges:

- 1) How can models be developed to impact all staff across a school community, as well as targeting particular groups such as early career teachers?
- 2) How can models be developed that take account of the community context, local families and pupils?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and funding will no doubt be a key factor in deciding to what extent the Oldham model might be further developed and refined. However, developing robust systems to capture and track impact across the life of a reflective supervision process – whether at individual, school, or local authority level - will be key, and the survey measure developed for this evaluation may be crucial to this.

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