Community Psychology: ‘Capacity building’ by meeting the needs of the adults in schools.
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Abstract
Increasingly the mental health of adults working in schools is coming to the attention of school psychologists working for Local Authorities. During routine visits, psychologists often hear how head teachers, teachers and teaching assistants are being challenged in their work, particularly with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Feelings of stress, hopelessness or being overwhelmed are commonly expressed. This limits the responsiveness of adults and in turn the capacity of the organisation to meet the diverse needs of children in their care.

Peer supervision has been found to be helpful in addressing this issue in a number of caring professions and its potential is starting to be explored in educational settings. This paper starts by outlining the usefulness of peer supervision and how this can be structured through Solution Focussed Support groups.

Two projects evaluate this approach. The first project involved a group of Middle school teachers and teaching assistants. The project was short term with one session being provided weekly for six weeks. Before and after self-report ratings were compared along with responses to open-ended questions. Clear benefits are identified for the participants in terms of feeling supported by peers (p=0.0205), engaging in reflective thinking (p=0.0205), formally engaging in solving problems with peers (p=0.008) and feeling more able to consult with colleagues outside of the group sessions (p=0.0205). No detrimental effects were found in terms of personal confidence, feelings of coping, reliance on managers or outside specialists, or devaluing personal experience.

The second project (McBlain et al., Submitted) describes how the same approach was used to support a group of seven primary school head teachers who were so stressed by the competing demands of their job that they were considering leaving the profession. Thematic analysis of post-intervention interviews gives a qualitative insight into the benefits and barriers of this approach from the phenomenological perspective of the head teachers involved.

The similarities of the two projects are considered along with the implications for developing this important community-based role.
**Background**

Teachers in schools in England are being asked to undertake two tasks that at times seem to pull them in opposite directions. On the one hand, they are expected to adopt an inclusive philosophy and meet the needs of all children from the locality that attend their school (the inclusion agenda). On the other hand, they are being asked to ensure that all children reach a politically determined standard (the achievement agenda). While this is not a new problem in education, having first caused concerns in the early 1900s (Squires & Farrell, 2006), it can place teachers in a double bind. Being inclusive means that not all children will reach the government defined levels of attainment expected at given ages. The worry for teachers is that taking more children with Special Educational Needs dilutes the performance of the teacher or the school. While following a purely achievement agenda means that teachers will exclude slow learners because the pace of the curriculum is delivered too quickly, or children with behavioural difficulties are excluded because they cause too much disruption to allow teaching to progress fast enough to hit this term’s targets. The two seemingly opposing agendas mean that teachers may feel damned if they respond to the inclusion agenda or dammed if they respond to the achievement agenda. Yet there is some evidence to suggest that when teachers stop to think about how to meet the needs of individual pupils by adjusting their teaching, other children in the class also benefit and overall standards are improved (Squires, 2001). The two agendas do not need to be in opposition. Unfortunately, in many schools there is not enough time to stop and to think, leaving teachers feeling the stress that results from finding themselves in a double bind. High numbers of teachers have been reported as calling counselling lines as a result of the stresses of teaching difficult children, conflict with colleagues, having to work outside their perceived expertise, or not having access to ‘experts’ who could deal with difficult children (Hanko, 2002).

Headteachers have to manage staff who may polarise themselves on either the achievement agenda or the inclusion agenda. They also have to respond to external pressures driving both agendas e.g. publication of the schools performance at meeting targets in the National ‘league tables’ or Local Authority pressures to place challenging children in their school. There is a fast pace of educational change to deal with as one government initiative after another hits schools. Ironically, many of the new initiatives are trying to deal with raising standards in education by being more inclusive and meeting individual needs (e.g. see DfES, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Some of the changes encroaching on schools are massive systemic changes that affect how services are delivered to children and their families and the role that schools have to play in this (DfES, 2004). Headteachers also have to deal with their changing role that takes them away from the classroom and increasingly into an administrative role dealing with Health and Safety, Buildings Regulations, Employment Law to name but a few of the non-teaching tasks undertaken.

Educational psychologists (EPs) have a wide and varied role; traditionally this has been focussed around assessment and intervention in a cluster of schools served by a ‘patch’ EP (Squires & Farrell, 2006). A recent review of the role of educational psychologists in England and Wales identified a
move towards community based services to meet children’s needs as a result of the re-organisation of services to children (Farrell et al., 2006). The Every Child Matters agenda (DFES, 2004) is leading to a shift in focus in many educational psychology services away from direct work with children to more collaborative work in virtual multiprofessional teams around children. Ultimately, this may mean that less EP time is devoted to providing school centred delivery of educational psychology services. In school settings, this means that EPs are increasingly using consultative approaches when working with the adults who support children or they are working systemically to build the capacity of schools as organisations to meet the needs of children in their care. At the same time, the needs of children are being re-defined beyond the school centred academic goals of reading, writing and arithmetic and as five broad outcomes (Be healthy, Stay safe, Enjoy and achieve, Make a positive contribution, Achieve economic well-being).

The organisational capacity of schools to respond to these changes depends ultimately on the personal resources of the workers. It is the teachers, teaching assistants and Headteachers whose level of skill, personal resilience and energies are needed to cope with the increasing demands placed upon them in meeting children’s needs. Of the different professionals who work in the emerging multiprofessional teams providing children’s services, educational psychologists may be best placed to support key adults in capacity building by helping them deal with the emotional stress of change, reflect upon their skill base, share skills with others and build personal resilience and emotional energy to cope.

Peer supervision is a recognised mechanism that involves a collaborative and reflective discussion with a trusted co-worker. It is used in the helping professions as a forum for support and is well established for mental health workers e.g. mental health nurse lecturers (Claveirole & Mathers, 2003), mental health professionals working with child sexual abuse (Day et al., 2003), home care of mental health patients (Magnusson et al., 2002) and long term care of mental health patients (Magnusson et al., 2004). Peer supervision has been found to be beneficial in dealing with counter transference (Markus et al., 2003). It has been used in genetic counselling and the supportive nature of the supervisory group has been cited in a difficult case for the counsellor in which the patient committed suicide (Bosco, 2000). There is a place for supervision in providing school counsellors’ personal development by establishing a clearer idea of professional role and function and improving job satisfaction (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006). Nurse managers using peer supervision had improved self-esteem and it reinforced participants’ self image (Hyrras et al., 2003). It has been helpful in preventing burnout amongst psychotherapists (Counselman & Weber, 2004). Peer supervision has been used to support educational psychologists and promote effective working with schools (Squires & Williams, 2003).

Different models exist for peer supervision. Arrangements vary from meeting dyads to working in groups (Markus et al., 2003). A third arrangement had been trialled involving 3 people in rotating dyads so that person A acted as a supervisor to person B, person B then acted as a supervisor to person C, and person C supervised person A (Squires & Williams, 2003). Many of the arrangements...
for supervision work on the principle of ‘flat management’. In general, this means that participants have similar status and do not have responsibility for line management of others in the pairing, triad or the group.

The group format involves between 6 and 10 co-workers meeting on a regular basis. Modified forms of peer supervision have incorporated a consultant working with schools to run staff support groups drawing on approaches used by Hanko (Hanko, 1987, 2002; Norwich & Daniels, 1997; Stringer et al., 1992) and in Further Education to promote inclusion (Guishard, 2000). However, the external consultant should no longer be necessary once a group has been taught the processes for running a supervision session. Instead, the group can be organised with a rotating leader. This has been criticised because it can be difficult for the leader to maintain the role of facilitating the group process and they are often tempted to join in the consultation. There is also a temptation for the group to come off-task or to engage in free association that moves away from the problem being discussed (Markus et al., 2003). One way of getting around some of these difficulties is to provide a structure and for the leader to be redefined as a group facilitator who simply keeps the group to the scripted structure.

The group format has been seen as advantageous in helping participants engage in self-appraisal and in developing self-esteem and professional identity (Counselman & Weber, 2004). Group arrangements have the potential benefit of harnessing a pool of knowledge and experience. However, this approach has been criticised for its potential to limit disclosures, allowing some participants to be uncommitted and passive, being difficult to maintain in focus (‘task drift’) and being difficult to maintain the group meetings over time (Counselman & Weber, 2004; Hyrkas et al., 2003). The group process can be risky, having a potential for developing feelings of shame when discussing difficult aspects of professional work and this can threaten the self-esteem of participants (Counselman & Weber, 2004). These critiques can be managed by setting out an expectation of a series of meetings in advance with a commitment from participants to attend regularly and protecting the time for group contact. A tight structure will help maintain focus and purpose for the group. The level of disclosure may be limited in early sessions until participants feel that they can trust the other members of the group. Partly this is achieved through having clear ground rules about confidentiality, a non-judgemental approach and a structure that celebrates the individuals previous efforts. Partly it is achieved through the normalising effect of the group – hearing that other people have experienced the same difficulties as yourself is therapeutically reassuring and encourages further openness. The interpretation that a non-speaking participant is passive and non-committed is simplistic and does not take account of the internal dialogue and self-reflection that takes place or the benefit of learning from other people’s experiences. With this in mind, one of the ground rules may be the overt statement that it is ‘okay to pass’ as the discussion goes around the group. Other formal arrangements could be made to encourage participation e.g. having a sequence for deciding whose case or problem is to be discussed in each session, or follow-up paired discussions that allow further exploration of the issues raised in the group session.
Stringer et al (1992) describe the use of peer support groups to encourage education workers to develop a ‘deeper understanding of the most difficult to teach pupils’. In Hanko’s work, teachers were brought together:

- To share a case problem or concern with people assisting each other in the group setting
- Be facilitated in using a problem solving framework
- Be supported and encouraged to seek solutions to the difficulty
- Form an autonomous group that supported the autonomy of the individual

Hanko comments that when teachers are given the opportunity to explore difficulties in problem focused groups they are “surprised at how much more they can in fact do with their pupils as well as for each other”. The process of group consultation encourages teachers to ‘reflect-on-action’ and develops skills to help them be better able to consult with others outside of the group situation (Hanko, 2002).

Peer supervision draws upon the three main functions of counselling (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989):

- The Educative or Formative function is concerned with the development of the supervisee’s knowledge and skills and allows reflection of the main content and process of the work undertaken. Peer supervision allows the transmission of professional knowledge, values and skills from the other group members. It enables the supervisee to learn about their individual strengths through the reflections of the supervision group. It develops congruence between educational and pedagogic theory and practice and enhances and evaluates professional competencies.
- The Supportive or Restorative function is concerned with helping the supervisee deal with the emotional aspects of working with people. Supervision provides space to reflect on the issues that arise from work and helps workers integrate what they are doing, feeling and thinking. It provides valuable support after stressful situations and leads to increase in feelings of competence and feelings of being able to cope with difficult types of work. Supervision allows validation of the supervisee as a person as well as a worker.
- The Managerial or Normative function is concerned with quality-control. It can provide a mechanism for the individual to monitor the quality of professional services. Although this might be thought of as the responsibility of a line manager, it also falls to the supervisor to ensure that work is of an appropriate ethical standard. In the case of headteachers, there are many outsider influences that act as judges on their work (e.g. Ofsted, Local Authority officers, local press, parent pressure groups etc) but it is up to head teachers to make decisions about what really happens in their schools and to set priorities. The supervision group provides an opportunity to compare notes with other headteachers facing similar challenges (McBlain et al., Submitted). Encouraging pro-active thinking and planning about the work helps to ensure the quality of the work undertaken and allows the supervisee to develop high quality practice.

Hawkins and Shohet go on to describe ‘consultancy supervision’ as that in which the supervisee is responsible for consulting with their supervisor “who is neither their trainer/nor manager, on those issues they wish to explore” (op cit, pp 45). This way of defining professional supervision is used as the basis for thinking about Peer Supervision in these projects and leads to the aims for the outcome of supervision.
Supervision using Solution Focused Staff Support groups is a collaborative exercise that provides an opportunity for the supervisee to reflect on different aspects of their work with peers acting in a supervisor role, with a view to continuing the learning process. Supervision aims to focus on maximising the supervisee’s own resources to work more effectively. This should:

1. Give participants the opportunities to explore and learn from practical, experiential and theoretical elements of their own professional practice and that of other group members (Educative function)
2. Provide an opportunity for discussion of potentially controversial issues, or those with uncertain ethical connotations (Supportive and Managerial functions). For the Headteachers the opportunity to do this outside of their school environment was considered to be very important. For the teachers and teaching assistants in the project it was important not to have any line-managers involved in the group sessions.
3. Enhance the quality of the Headteachers ability to manage their own schools and for teachers to manage their own classrooms in a more inclusive way (Managerial function) by using supervision as a way of exploring practical solutions that could then be tried through what has been termed ‘practical experimentation’ (Zorga et al., 2001).
4. Maintain and improve the emotional health of the participants and reduce their levels of perceived stress (Supportive function)

In the two projects described here, a modified form of peer supervision is developed into a framework that takes into account the types of staff support groups reported by previous workers (Hanko, 1987, 2002; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Norman, 2005; Squires & Williams, 2003; Stringer et al., 1992; Visser & Norman, 2004).

Setting up and Running Solution Focused Staff Support Groups

In both of the projects described, the participants were a self-selecting opportunistic sample of school staff who had reported experiencing high levels of stress as a result of their job demands. The psychologist involved in each study felt that peer supervision might be helpful for the reasons already described. Staff were invited to participate in a fixed number of sessions to be led by an educational psychologist, with the explicit aim of allowing the groups to continue beyond the initial setting-up period without further involvement from the EP. Participants were told that each project would be formally evaluated and informed consent verbally agreed.

A briefing letter was devised for each project to explain the nature of the peer supervision groups. This stated that Solution Focussed Staff Support Groups are intended for small groups of head teachers, teachers, teaching assistants and pastoral staff who have to support challenging children or face challenging work situations. The groups were set up for between 6 and 10 staff and run as leaderless or co-operative groups (‘flat management’ or group agreement is used rather than traditional management structures). This placed a restriction on group membership, e.g. in study 1, only teachers and teaching assistants were allowed to participate; while study 2 was intended only for Headteachers. A fixed number of sessions were specified with the expectation that participants would attend all of the sessions. Each session was to last between 90 minutes and 2 hours.
Unlike some of the previously discussed supervision groups, it was decided that a structured approach would be adopted that focused on solutions rather than on problems. This draws on ideas from Solution Focused Brief Therapy (De Shazer, 1985), particularly in asking what had been done already that was successful and in affirming actions taken and support given. Although the idea of rotating who would bring issues for discussion was considered, a decision was reached that the group would decide for themselves which issues would be discussed in each session. The processes of a reflecting solution focused team can be broken down into discrete stages (Norman, 2006). This was used to produce a scripted handout for use (see Appendix). The main parts of the session are:

- **Start** – acknowledging the coming together of members from different situations or circumstances and allowing a chance to catch up socially. Ground rules mark the formal start of the session along with focusing on the aims to be achieved.

- **Feedback from the previous session** follows allowing the group to hear how suggestions were implemented. This phase also sets the expectation that the session will lead to action on the part of the person who brings an issue for discussion.

- **Raising new concerns with the group** is the part of the session where the group listens to a brief description of issues brought by participants and then selects the issue or issues for discussion during the remainder of the session.

- Once an issue has been selected, the person who has brought the issue (the supervisee) then explains in detail their case to the supervisory group who listen without comment.

- **The clarification and elaboration phase** involves the group in asking exploratory questions to encourage reflection on the part of the supervisee and to help identify exceptions to the problem and times when the supervisee has had some successes.

- **The affirming phase** is used to identify strengths on the part of the supervisee by asking each person in the group to comment on something that they have found impressive in what has been done already.

- **During the reflective phase**, the group take it in turns to offer something back. This may be advice or comments about similarities to situations in which they have found themselves. It may be raising legalistic issues or concerns or providing negative feedback. The overall aim of this phase is to identify potential ways forward.

- **The closing phase** involves the supervisee commenting back to the group about what has been useful. They usually try to set themselves a task to do before the next session that involves a goal or something to try.

- The session ends with a review of the process that has been undertaken. This serves the function of maintaining the process for the benefit of the group. When necessary, the process is adapted for the next session.
**Study 1**

The first study took place in a Middle School catering for 461 pupils between the ages of 9 and 13 years. The school was one of 19 schools that I cover in my role as an educational psychologist. The school has a good positive ethos and staff interact well with each other. Over the last couple of years there had been an increase in pupils whose behaviours were challenging to the school system and emotionally challenging to staff. Some of these pupils were on the verge of being excluded unless their behaviour could be better managed in the school setting. Working on a case-by-case basis with individual teachers, I had noticed that the teachers often had very good ideas for supporting children and could implement these ideas after we had discussed them. Sometimes when I sat in the staffroom, I was able to hear adults sharing ideas informally. More often than not, however, informal discussions seemed to be adults complaining to each other about the children. While this latter response provided good emotional support and an outlet for frustrations and anger, it did not always lead to an improvement in the situation.

Teachers, teaching assistants and pastoral staff were invited to volunteer for six after-school sessions to learn how to run Solution Focused Staff Support Groups. The idea was that school staff would then be able to share experiences and ideas, engage in joint problem solving and support each other in developing interventions to use with pupils presenting with challenging behaviours. At the same time, the behaviour of the children could be shared and the group used to normalise the experiences of the adults involved. Things would not seem so bad if the child was seen to behave in the same way for other teachers.

Initially ten members of staff joined the group and nine attended all six sessions. The participants were asked to bring an issue or a case to each session for discussion by the group. Each session included an element of teaching about the processes involved in effective Solution Focused Staff Support Groups and a handout was produced as an aide memoir for the different steps involved. After the first session staff were encouraged to take on the role of the facilitator so that after the training was completed they would be able to continue running the groups without me being present. The sessions are tightly placed together to allow teaching of some skills and then practice and development of skills through supported ‘live’ sessions. It was hoped that if the participants found the sessions useful they would have sufficient knowledge of the process to be able to run further sessions for themselves.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire before the training started and again after the training started. The pre and post measures consisted of 11 statements that staff were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest). The post questionnaire also included open-ended questions. Seven members of staff completed and returned the questionnaires on both occasions. Further reflections from participants and my own reflections after each session were also noted as part of an ongoing research diary.
Rating results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement rated by 7 teachers on a scale of 1 to 10. (10 being the highest)</th>
<th>Mean Pre</th>
<th>Mean Post</th>
<th>Level of Significance (Wilcoxon ranked sign test, 1 tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How confident do you feel in dealing with children with behavioural difficulties?</td>
<td>7.571</td>
<td>8.714</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do some children’s behavioural difficulties seem insurmountable?</td>
<td>6.429</td>
<td>6.571</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you feel that you can cope with the challenges that you face each day?</td>
<td>8.429</td>
<td>8.714</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you feel that you are supported by colleagues?</td>
<td>6.500</td>
<td>7.714</td>
<td>P=0.0205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful do you find thinking about what you have done in helping you meet the demands of your job?</td>
<td>8.000</td>
<td>8.929</td>
<td>P=0.0205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are trying to solve a problem, how well do the following help?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• past experience</td>
<td>9.143</td>
<td>9.429</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• asking colleagues</td>
<td>6.929</td>
<td>8.286</td>
<td>P=0.0205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• talking informally with colleagues</td>
<td>7.000</td>
<td>8.429</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• formally solving problems together as a group</td>
<td>7.143</td>
<td>8.857</td>
<td>P=0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• asking line manager(s)</td>
<td>8.000</td>
<td>7.571</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• outside specialists</td>
<td>6.667</td>
<td>8.167</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Mean ratings from staff for each item

The results table shows that significant changes were evident in four of the eleven self-rating indices used. This means that there was an increase in how much teachers felt supported by colleagues, how much they considered having the time to think was helpful, how much they felt that they could ask their colleagues to help them solve a problem and in feelings of the usefulness of formally engaging in problem solving as a group. The other indices yield no significant changes and pre and post measures can therefore be assumed to be the same.

Discussion of the results from case study 1

Given that the first case study only had seven participants, who completed both pre and post measures, it is not surprising to find that some of the indices did not yield a significant result. A bigger change across the group would be needed to cancel out the effect of individual variation and random noise. The second difficulty with the data was due to unexpected ceiling effects in the pre-intervention measures. Although teachers had commented on difficulties that they were experiencing, some of them managed to rate themselves at level 10 for some of the indices. This means that if there were any positive changes in their perceptions then these could not be recorded. The Wilcoxon ranked sign test takes this into account by noting the overall change in ratings across the group and calculating whether this is big enough for the sample size to be considered significant. Generally speaking the bigger the sample size, the smaller the change that is needed for the result to be considered significant.
Having a significant result for 4 of the indices allows further exploration of the extent of the change occurring. The change in the overall pattern of scores as a result of the intervention is referred to as effect size. For the purposes of this study, effect size was calculated using Cohen’s d (Cohen, 1988), taking into account the reduction in the spread of the results caused by the ceiling effects by using a pooled standard deviation (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1996).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement rated by 7 teachers on a scale of 1 to 10. (10 being the highest)</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
<th>Descriptor for effect size (Cohen, 1988)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you feel that you are supported by colleagues?</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>Medium effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful do you find thinking about what you have done in helping you meet the demands of your job?</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>Medium effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are trying to solve a problem, how well do the following help?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• asking colleagues</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>Medium effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• formally solving problems together as a group</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Large effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Size effect for ratings showing significant change

The quantitative data seems to suggest that teachers’ feelings changed because of the experience of being part of a solution focused support group. The biggest shift across the group was in how they perceived as beneficial the process of formally solving problems together. Teachers clearly felt more empowered to ask colleagues outside of the group for help. They valued having ‘time to think’ and reflect on practice and having the support of colleagues.

The open-ended questions also supported this view. Prior to the group sessions, teachers had commented that time was pressured and the only opportunities to meet with others had to be snatched from lunchtimes and morning briefing time and after school. The overall feeling was summed up well by one teacher who wrote that there was “not enough time to do all that you would like to do to support challenging pupils”. People reported that they had to rely on their own experiences to cope with the challenges presented on a day-to-day basis. When they could meet with colleagues this was helpful. Some people thought that discussing pupils with line managers and members of the senior management team was helpful, however some thought that it did not help at all. Most participants said that they were reasonably confident when faced with behavioural difficulties though a few reported times when difficulties seemed insurmountable.

Once the sessions had been completed, participants commented on how easy it had been to meet and discuss with colleagues in the group setting. One teacher commented that, “it helps to talk and share experiences and problems”. Another commented on the need to do this in the school setting because of, “the shared experiences of individual pupils”. The power of the group as a supportive mechanism was commented on, “shared problems are easier to cope with” and it was “very different than talking with senior management team who gave the impression that it was your fault if you could not deal with the child”. Participants found the ideas helpful in their class teaching and in their wider roles around the school, e.g. “I will use the strategies that we have discussed to hopefully further develop the support I give within the school”. One person noted that the “discussion helped to identify common concerns about children who had not been picked up
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through other systems in school for identifying children with behavioural difficulties”. The structure contained in the script was seen as helpful e.g. “I felt unsure during the first two sessions but found the structure of the procedure kept me focussed on what I was hoping to achieve”. The limitations of the process were also noted in that the participants were only able to deal with issues within their control e.g. one teacher commented, “it did not solve some of the problems around school organisation for example how well Senior Management Team could respond if there were severe problems in class”

The introduction of the procedures for running the group and maintaining the group was itself interesting and gives some insight into how future groups might be managed. Initially, an attempt was made to apply the process rigidly to model what a solution focussed support group could be like. The participants wanted to backtrack and add more detail to that given by the person telling the story. This helped to elaborate on the problem and what had been tried by different people. This seemed to be useful in normalising the experience for the person bringing the concern. However, it also involved many people in trying to make sense of what was happening. This made the question section more difficult, it relied on people not directly involved with the problem asking more questions of the ‘team’ who shared the concern. Ongoing decisions needed to be made about who would ask the question? Who would answer? Should each person answer in turn? Should it only be addressed to the person bringing the concern? A slightly looser format with a more informal feel was adopted during the remaining sessions. This seemed a better process for the group concerned and means that the format in the appendix is recommended as for guidance only.

One of the hopes of this project was that the school could take on the running of the group for themselves. In the plan was the intention that during the third session the psychologist would pass the facilitator on and support one of the group members acting as the facilitator. None of the group members were prepared to volunteer. After an uncomfortable few minutes of trying to encourage, cajole and persuade the group, I had to accept that this was not going to happen. This has meant that without direct support the school has not been able to undertake the sessions for themselves. As one of the teachers commented at the end of the project, “We need you here to stop us from going off-task and just talking about the problems. We would never get round to thinking about what to do”.

There was a definite tension between wanting to empower the group to search for their own solutions and the group wanting an expert to provide answers for them. My plea to run the session and see how it went without me giving suggestions or psychological advice was forcefully rejected. During the early sessions, this was dealt with by running the group according to the format and participating in the group process. This was useful to model the types of questions that could be asked to elaborate, define the problem or to encourage reflective thinking. It also provided a point for commenting positively about the strategies that had been tried already. There was an agreement with the group that once the session was over, I would stay for 20 minutes to answer questions and offer further advice. By the fourth session, the group were less reliant on me and were starting to rely on each other. However, they tended to look to me to see if what they had done was ‘right’ – the expert role was diminished but seemed inescapable. I tried to deal with this by sharing my
honest amazement at the commitment of the staff in trying to solve the problem and the number of strategies that they had adopted or thought of during the session. Through the richness of the discussion came the impression of a caring staff who wanted to do the best for the children and who were prepared to go to quite extraordinary lengths to improve the situation.

Like most groups that form, the cohesiveness of the group improved as the sessions went on. The group started as a supportive group and became more supportive and open in discussion and expression of feelings. Before running the sessions, I had been worried about power relationships within the group members, given that there was a mixture of teachers and teaching assistants. However, the three teaching assistants were very valuable to the group, they had experience of the children in more than one lesson and they were able to share strategies that they had seen adopted by teachers not present in the group. Their advice, suggestions and questions were well received by the teachers. The teaching assistants were less willing to challenge teachers during the earlier sessions but their confidence seemed to grow as their reflective questions or contradictory experiences were accepted by the teachers.

**Study 2**

The second study involved a group of seven primary school Headteachers who reported high levels of stress related to their job role. This included complaints about increasing demands on head teachers in meeting targets; managing staff; increased administrative roles and dealing with pupils and their families who were experiencing more complex socio-economic issues. It became clear that a number of the head teachers were feeling very isolated and becoming overwhelmed with these greater demands, indeed leading some of them to seriously consider resigning. As one Headteacher put it, “There are pressures to perform – like getting one hundred percent of children to level 4 – how do you do this when you have SEN\(^1\) children? There are also stresses around the new OfSted framework – not really reflecting the true nature of the school only looking at the results. I’m now 50 and have been teaching for 30 years. I’ve been a head for 12 years and now I’ve had enough – it’s time for change because of pressures like OfSted and test results and all the other things.”(McBlain et al., Submitted).

The group met away from their school premises and chose to meet away from any official educational buildings by hiring a room in a local pub. The group met as a whole twice. In the first session, an educational psychologist chaired the session and took responsibility for managing the group process and the session structure using the scripted framework in the appendix. In the second session, one of the Headteachers acted as the facilitator and the educational psychologist supported along with an assistant educational psychologist.

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\(^1\)“SEN children” – the headteacher is referring to children who are identified as having a special educational need and receiving additional support from within the school’s delegated resources. By definition, these children will be ‘below average’ and unlikely to reach expected targets set by central government.
The Headteachers were also paired so that they could use the scripted format with each other in paired supervision. Each dyad could decide how often to meet and where to meet – with the minimum expectation that they would meet at least once.

Six to eight weeks later the effectiveness of the supervision was evaluated by recording a semi structured interview with each Headteacher. Interviews were then transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis based around four pre-defined codes:

- The types of problems that the Headteachers experienced
- Why peer supervision was seen as the only forum for discussing these problems
- What was helpful about the sessions and the process of peer supervision
- What potential (or actual) barriers had impeded the process

Headteachers were also asked to rate their feelings about the usefulness of peer support; the use of their time to this process; and, how likely they would be to aside time again in the future for peer supervision.

### Results and discussion of Study 2

The Headteachers rated the process of peer supervision highly and indicated that it was a good use of their time and indicated a commitment to continuing with peer supervision (see table).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of the peer support group</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Head teacher time</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepared to set time again in the future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Headteacher ratings (0 is low, 10 is high)

Positive comments about peer supervision far exceeded negative aspects or potential barriers with a ratio of 3.57:1 (229 positives, 64 negative/barriers).

### The types of problems Headteachers experienced

Headteachers made it clear that they frequently felt very isolated in their roles within their schools. They commented that other staff in the school were unaware of the nature of the responsibilities and accountabilities of the head teacher in a school and they were often unable to offer practical or emotional support.
Staffing issues were raised with Headteachers indicating that they could not discuss these within their school community. Tensions with other members of the school management team left some Headteachers feeling that decision-making could be more difficult when they felt that they are being pulled between the different views or standpoints of the other individuals. “It would be different if there were only two of you – yourself and a deputy, but when there’s three, if you have two assistant heads, you feel like you are being pulled this way and that trying to keep both parties happy and not to be seen to favour one or the other.”

Emotional support from colleagues was often difficult. They said that on occasions when they felt emotionally overwhelmed they could not show this to other staff members, even the SMT as they believed that this may have been interpreted as weakness or lack of leadership ability.

In contrast the supervision group’s educative function allowed problems to be discussed and explored. Examples of the issues raised included:

- Staffing issues such as incompetence, team efficiency, incompatibility of personalities, responsibility points and staff structuring.
- Administrative issues such as Self Evaluation Forms (SEF), School Profiles, Ofsted, Performance management, responsibilities for buildings and maintenance.
- Procedural issues such as disciplinary and exclusion procedures.
- Other issues such as dealing with parents and maintaining school standards in general.

**Potential barriers**

Three other Headteachers had been invited to participate but were unable to attend. The non-attending Headteachers cited time pressures and teaching commitments as their main reason for not taking part. All of the head teachers, including those who took part in the sessions said that this sort of work should be arranged well in advance and that even then they might not attend if they were called upon to deal with unexpected crises.

The non-attending heads also expressed a worry that the sessions might be stressful and that they would have more emotional weight to carry. As one headteacher said, “I’m afraid it would become negative and people would get a sense of unburdening themselves”. Another commented, “I’m too emotional to be able to be able to offer support to others. I also don’t feel that I’ve got enough experience to offer.” Other fears expressed were concerns about confidences being broken or of being exposed as ‘weak’ or ‘not up to the job’.

A Headteacher who had taken the role of Chair stated that she had felt uncomfortable in this role and that her inexperience in this role may have impeded the support of a colleague.

Several Headteachers said that they believed that this sort of group may not work in an area where there was rivalry between schools. In contrast, they thought that their schools had become even more open to each other than they had been previously and this could stop potential tensions developing. Several said that they were now working on projects and tasks together such as classroom observations, professional development, school prospectuses and job descriptions and that they felt more comfortable in seeking support from others in the group. “Even if I could not air a problem in the group I now feel that I could contact the others and still get support.”
Perceived individual benefits

The head teachers who attended the sessions said that structured nature of the process and the establishment of confidentiality and supportive relationships were very effective. The inclusion of a chairperson to manage the proceedings and to observe time limits helped the group to reach conclusions more effectively as well as providing emotional and practical support. “It was far better than I expected. The structured approach gave us what we needed – a way of getting stuff off your chest as well as getting lots of useful suggestions.” “I did get upset when I was talking about the problem to the group but I didn’t mind that.”

The wide range of experience in the group provided many different angles to a problem and raised the possibility of more solutions. Hearing others with the same problem had a normalising effect and helped individuals feel less isolated and incompetent. The fact that the sessions provided a positive response to solving problems rather than just expressing concern in an unfocussed way was welcomed by the head teachers and encouraged a more positive outlook. “It helped us realise that there are ways through these situations that don’t mean going away and banging your head against a brick wall - just that short spell has made us a better group – it has made us all more forward looking.”

One head teacher commented on the feelings of warmth and support that she had felt directed towards her as she shared her concern with the group. She described how the intensity of these feelings had made her feel very emotional yet more empowered and confident. Although her emotional reaction had been a shock, it showed her how deeply she had been affected by the issue that she had shared and how much she valued being given permission and time to speak about her concerns.

All head teachers who attended the sessions valued that the fact that the venue was away from school and took place in a more relaxed and leisurely environment.

The headteachers reported that the sessions had helped them develop problem-solving skills and encouraged different ways of thinking though issues and approaching difficulties. Some head teachers commented that by contributing to the group their own self esteem and confidence had increased and some reported noting observed changes in themselves and in other heads.

Headteacher views on groups versus paired models of supervision

There was a general consensus was that there was a need and a role for both forms of supervision. While paired sessions were seen as a means of allowing individuals to ‘mull over’ problems for longer, whole group sessions provide a range of support in a crisis. Group sessions were described as being of benefit because they provide a very diverse range of experiences, although it was noted that there may be different areas of interest within the group.
Paired sessions were seen as being more informal and easier to arrange and maintain. However, all of the Headteachers said that they would be more inclined to commit to a group as it would be less easy to re-arrange than a paired session and therefore less easy to be relegated if there were time pressures. Paired work was felt to allow a deeper personal relationship to develop, but this was also seen as a drawback if the pair was incompatible.

The Headteachers said that both the group and paired work session structure allows an individual to ask more searching questions than they felt that they could in an informal discussion, especially when they were less familiar with the other person.

The importance of structure was also highlighted in observations made by the educational psychologist and assistant psychologist during the group sessions. Where the process was not adhered to consistently, individuals engaged in dialogues that diverted the proceedings away from the central issues and sometimes delayed or obscured the clarification or resolution of the problem. This was particularly apparent when members of the group had different opinions or standpoints and were allowed to engage in discussion or disputes, using anecdotes to illustrate their points. However, when the chair maintained the process effectively the proceedings were more efficient in the resolution of an issue.

**Overall discussion and implications for practice**

The two case studies are on first glance very different. One is a group of teachers and teaching assistants working in the same school and needing support to respond to the challenging behaviour of pupils in the classroom. The second is a group of Headteachers from different schools who are having to respond to the challenges of managing their schools. The similarity in the two case studies is that both sets of workers were experiencing job-related stresses that reduced their capacity to cope with the demands placed on them and consequently reduced their personal effectiveness in supporting and educating the children in their care. Both sets of workers were presented with an opportunity to participate in Solution Focussed Staff Support Groups and engaged with this as a volunteer sample.

In both case studies, the structured process of formally arranged peer supervision has been shown to be effective in helping individuals cope with the demands placed upon them. This is consistent with studies of other professional groups (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Begat et al., 2003; Begat et al., 2005; Bosco, 2000; Claveirole & Mathers, 2003; Counselman & Weber, 2004; Day et al., 2003; Guishard, 2000; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Hyrkas et al., 2003; Magnusson et al., 2004; Magnusson et al., 2002; Markus et al., 2003; Norwich & Daniels, 1997; Prieto, 1997; Rau, 2002; Severinson & Hallberg, 1996; Squires & Williams, 2003; Wilkerson, 2006) and of other studies involving educators (Hanko, 1986, 1987; Stringer et al., 1992).

There is clear evidence from the quantitative measures used in study 1 and the qualitative data in study 2, of the three functions of supervision (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989) being met:
• The educative and formative function led to teachers and teaching assistants being more prepared to ask colleagues for help and feeling that solutions to problems were within their control (rather than needing outside experts or members of the senior management team). The Headteachers similarly report that they had learnt from each other.

• The supportive function led to Headteachers feeling able to call on their colleagues in other schools more easily. They were able to talk about difficult emotional problems that they faced within their own schools and benefit from the experiences of colleagues in the same position. The teachers and teaching assistants increased their feelings of being able to cope with the demands of their job.

• The managerial and normative function helped both groups feel that they were not alone in dealing with the problems that they faced and that others experienced the same difficulties. This added to the feelings that they could share these problems and meet together in a group to formally seek out solutions.

The conditions that have supported this seem to be:

• Having a flat management structure for peer supervision

• Having a clear and agreed structure with a facilitator who can manage the group through the structure and avoid task drift

• Having more than one session and regular attendance so that trust could be built up between group members

• Having ‘problems’ volunteered by individuals and agreed by the group to ensure ownership of the process and discussions that were meaningful to the participants

• Establishing ground rules around confidentiality and non-judgemental and non-blame approaches.

Given that there are many demands on education staff, one of the major barriers considered at the start of each project was that of time and commitment over a number of sessions. Yet in both case studies, participants had been able to find the time; they had found that the time spent was well spent; and, they indicated that they would make time available in the future for this type of activity.

Both groups found the structure useful. Yet both sets of professionals were reluctant to use the script and felt uncomfortable in taking on the role of facilitator. Both groups indicated that they wanted the peer supervision to continue, yet when left with the script and the task of organising this for themselves, were unable to do so. This is an interesting finding and contrary to that hoped at the onset of both case studies. We had hoped that once the groups were established and the process of solution focussed peer supervision modelled and taught using the scripted handout, that the groups would be sustainable. In both cases, the role of the educational psychologist as an outsider to the group who could make the necessary arrangements and facilitate the group seemed to be a
necessary condition for the groups continued success. Given the success of peer supervision across many professional groups it could not be argued that this role has to be undertaken by an educational psychologist, but it does suggest that it needs to be someone who can take responsibility for the management of the group processes.

In these two studies, the educational psychologist has been well placed to act in the community in working with adults to build capacity in their own organisations. This has enabled individual teachers and teaching assistants to feel that they can deal more effectively with children who present with challenging behaviour and to share ideas to improve teaching and learning. It has led to Headteachers sharing ideas to deal with management issues and to improve the overall effectiveness of their schools. This suggests that developing the educational psychologist role in working with groups of adults using solution focussed peer supervision is worthwhile and adds value to the work of the adults in their schools. It enhances the skills that individual workers already have and increases their resilience and capacity to respond to the challenges that they face.

References


## Appendix: The Solution Focussed Group Process Handout

### Structure of the Group
The group should consist of between 6 and 10 staff who have chosen to be part of the group. The group is self-managed and designed to be autonomous. This means that all people in the group have equal power in the decision making process. It usually means that it is not appropriate for a line manager to be part of the group.

### Start of session
This part of the session helps prepare people for the session and focuses on what the group hope to get out of the session.

1. Problem free talk as group meets, drinks prepared, catch up with gossip etc
2. Welcome. Ground rules (or reminder).
   a. Confidentiality
   b. Following the process
   c. No put downs
   d. Giving people chance to speak (one person speaks at a time)
3. Reminder of aims of session
   a. focus on finding solutions to presenting problems
   b. provide an opportunity to explore feelings and our reactions to situations
   c. attend and listen carefully so that we are able to give helpful summaries
   d. give feedback of a concern previously shared
   e. receive feedback from the group about a particular aspect of our contribution

### Feedback from Previous session
This is an opportunity for the group to hear about how previously discussed problems have been dealt with. Were the suggestions useful? Did the person who raised the problem try out suggestions? Did talking about the problem lead to something different being tried? How are things now?

### Raising new concerns to be shared with the group
This is where each person in the group offers a problem to be shared. Initially this is just a brief description e.g. ‘I’d like to talk about Craig’s swearing’, ‘I’d like to talk about how angry I feel in Mr X’s lessons’. Once each person has identified a potential concern to discuss, the group needs to select one to deal with first. Some general tips include:

- Not having rotas for dealing with concerns. Choose a concern that the group is happy to work on – not because it is Mrs Smith’s go this week
  - Own the problem. Do not discuss someone else’s concern e.g. don’t talk about John throwing things simply because the Head teacher asks you to – this is not the forum for setting school policy. Focus on how the problem affects you – how does it make you feel? What have you tried? What do you want the group to help with?
  - Don’t award marks for the most dramatic concern. It is probably better to try to deal with small niggling problems so that they can be prevented from becoming a huge problem.
### Outline of Concern Phase
One the group has chosen the first concern to be dealt with, the person who raised the concern starts to tell the story so far. They present the case. During this part of the session the other people listen.

### Clarifying and Elaboration Phase
The group now start to ask questions. The aim is to understand what it is like from the other person’s point of view. The facilitator has the task of ensuring that the group does not rush to give advice or make suggestions at this stage. The questions are important in that they help the other person to think about what is happening, what they have tried already, what seems to help and when the problem is less bad. Asking the questions can provide answers in itself as it leads to reflection and elaboration of the problem (referred to as ‘interventive interviewing’).

Types of questions that help are:

- Those that identify what needs clarifying in the other person’s story? What details do not seem clear? What assumptions are being made? What evidence is there to support beliefs?
- Who? What? When? Where?
- What seems to be impressive already?
- Feelings type questions – when do things feel better?

### Affirming Phase
Each person in the group says something back to the person who raised the problem. This is a positive phrase or comment about what they have found impressive in what they other person has said or done so far. (It is okay to be impressed about the same things as someone else.)

### Reflecting Phase
Members of the group now take it in turn to offer something back. This can be advice, suggestions, negative feedback, legalistic issues etc. The aim is to try to build up on previous comments to create new solutions or possible ways forwards. Members can pass. This continues to go around the group until no further comments can be made.

### Closing Phase
The person who raised the problem now comments back to the group on the comments that seem most useful. What was most applicable to their situation? They usually try to set themselves a goal or something to try to do.

### Process review
The facilitator leads this final part of the process. The aim is to think about what has happened during the session. Go through the process. Ask group to reflect on how they felt about the different phases. Was it useful? Helpful? What things seemed to help? What things seemed to hinder or were unhelpful? Do we need ground rules? Or, to modify the process for the next session?