Peer Supervision for EPs as a Means to Quality Service Delivery

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Supervision is a word that conjures up many different meanings. It is often used to refer to a management arrangement in which one person looks over the work of another. Peer supervision is something quite different. There are no intended power relationships, with workers of equal status meeting together on a regular basis to provide emotional support and contribute to ongoing development of understanding, skills, ethics and values of work undertaken. Good peer supervision contributes to the emotional well being of the professional and to high quality service delivery for clients.

Context

When most people are asked what they think educational psychologists do, they invariably refer to Statutory Assessment. While this remains the single biggest task that psychologists are involved in, it is not the only thing that EPs do. The work I do is interesting, varied and challenging at many levels. I can’t think of another job that I would rather do. A few other examples are shown in Box 1.

- Working across a wide age range of children (typically from 2 years old to 19 years, but sometimes younger) in a wide range of settings.
- Working with teachers, parents and pupils to understand why a child might not be learning and to try to devise ways of moving forwards.
- Providing information and advice to schools about particular conditions that children may have been diagnosed with (e.g. dyslexia, ADHD, autism, epilepsy etc).
- Helping teachers engage in a reflective process of joint problem solving, recognising their strengths and developing new skills or developing new approaches.
- Planning and delivering training for schools or centrally run courses on learning, behaviour, manual handling and SEN.
- Carrying out assessments of individual pupils’ strengths and weaknesses and their learning environments.
- Providing direct support to pupils through individual work and small group work.
- Being ‘with people’ when they are in an emotionally difficult place, (e.g. when they are bereaved, angry, upset, unsure what to do, feeling let down etc).
- Working with a school following the death of a child or other critical incident.
- Supporting schools that are developing post Ofsted Action plans, including schools designated as being in serious weakness or as Priority Support Schools.
- Helping schools engage in a process of self-review e.g. through the behaviour audit.
- Engaging in cross-district working, multi-agency working within the District and working with a wide range of professionals outside of the Education Service.
- Providing ongoing advice to the LEA and District to help in the development of policies.
- Acting as an ‘expert witness’ in SEN and DDA Tribunals.
- Engaging in small-scale action research and project work with schools to evaluate ‘what works’.

Box 1 Some of the work undertaken by EPs

Such a wide range of work places a high demand on the psychologist’s personal resources. Firstly, psychologists need to have a wide area of knowledge available to them and understand how systems such as the LEA, District, Schools and families operate. They have to be able to deal with information in a wide variety of formats and often in different technical frames and languages (school speak, medical speak, legal speak, statistics speak etc). As no one can know everything, this leads to the questions, “How do EPs access the information that they need? How can they develop and maintain such a diverse set of skills?”
Secondly, many of the tasks are high in emotional content and this means that the EP has not only to manage their own emotional responses, but they also have to support the emotions of the person they are working with (referred to as emotional holding). How can EPs manage to maintain their own mental health and not succumb to stress?

These issues are first addressed during the training of educational psychologists. Currently, EPs need to have a first degree in psychology (to provide a psychological knowledge base) followed by at least 2 years teaching (providing a very basic understanding of school systems). This is followed by a professional masters degree that starts to put theory into practice. This includes working in different LEAs and at least 75 hours of supervision. Supervision in this context means one-to-one support with another psychologist (university tutor or EP managing the field work) to engage in a process of reflection about the work undertaken. It serves to provide emotional support, ongoing education and managerial functions.

Once an EP has completed formal training and they start work with an LEA, they continue to have supervision during the first year of professional practice. This is a requirement for Chartered Status of the British Psychological Society. Usually this supervision is undertaken with a line manager.

The formal requirements for continued supervision cease on reaching Chartered status. The experienced EP is expected to provide high quality support for schools, teachers, parents, pupils and to the LEA. Somehow, EPs have to utilise a wide and diverse knowledge base in a varied social environment that is potentially emotionally difficult. This is a double-edged sword – on the one hand it makes the work interesting, yet on the other, it is very demanding.

**Peer Supervision in Staffordshire**

In some local education authorities this challenge has been addressed by setting up systems of peer supervision. About two years ago, a small group of EPs in Staffordshire started meeting to set up similar systems here. The first year of the project involved an interest group being established with EPs drawn from different Districts and with differing degrees of experience and differing roles within the Service. The group piloted different ways of organising supervision and this has now been extended to the rest of the Psychological Service:

- Group supervision – a small group of EPs meet and share a piece of difficult work brought by one of the group. The group act as the supervisors.
- Paired supervision – two EPs meet, each taking a turn at being the supervisor and the supervisee.
- Triads – 3 EPs are involved in different pairings that result in A supervising B, B supervises C and C supervises A.

Each EP has been expected to take part in one form of supervision over the last year. This has been evaluated by asking the 26 EPs to rate their experience of supervision against 4 specific aims of the project.

1. I was able to explore and learn from the practical, experiential and theoretical elements of professional practice. This is an educative element and allows the EP to extend or reflect on the psychology underpinning the work being undertaken. It can include thinking about new interventions or sharing the experience of other EPs.

2. I was able to explore and reach some resolution of ethical and potentially controversial issues. Professional practice for EPs is underpinned by guidelines about ethics from the British Psychological Society. Sometimes issues arise from the tensions to meet different client needs (e.g. the need of the

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**EPs who were part of the Supervision Working Party**

- Sally Williams
- Garry Squires
- Charles Galletly
- Lois Pearce-Jones
- Jill Jones
- Steve Laycock
- Alison Baddeley
- Paula Hodson
- Paul Tyler
- Frank Pearson (now working in Wolverhampton)
3. Supervision has helped me to enhance the quality of service that I deliver.

4. Supervision has helped me to feel better about the work that I have done and has contributed to maintaining and improving emotional health. This is the supportive element of supervision.

Results from the Service

The results for each of the aims were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Highest Rating</th>
<th>Lowest Rating</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aim 1 Enhanced knowledge and skill</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim 2 Ethical Practice</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim 3 Service delivery</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim 4 Emotional health</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(0=not at all, 10=very well)

This shows that all EPs felt that the aims were met reasonably (lowest rating 5), some felt they were very well met (highest rating 10). Three EPs felt that all aims were very well met (all ratings at 10). An analysis of the data on a District basis shows considerable agreement that aims were met in all Districts. Most importantly, the time taken for supervision has led to psychologists feeling that they were able to provide a better quality service to schools and other clients.

Comments on the evaluation sheets were positive:

‘Very useful at a time when I wasn’t coping so well with the job.’

‘Essential for me to carry out this sort of work.’

‘The experience has been unique for me.’

‘The time investment has been well worth it.’

‘These sessions have been a real highlight in a difficult year.’

‘Sessions have been helpful and enjoyable.’

Supervision was also discussed as an item at the end of the year Service meeting and the following positive comments were made:

‘It ensured I made time to reflect on my practice.’
'I felt cosseted and listened to.'

'It was helpful to clarify issues both beforehand and during the session.'

'My awareness of its value has grown over time.'

'It has given me more confidence in what I am doing.'

All reservations expressed mainly related to practical matters including: protecting the time, organising in terms of travel and booking appropriate rooms.

The results of the pilot year are impressive and encouraging. All EPs participated (even though supervision has not been mandatory) and this suggests that EPs feel a need for supervision. Several EPs within the Psychological Service have undertaken formal training in supervision to support the training of educational psychologists placed with Staffordshire from Birmingham University. This provided an opportunity to discuss what we have been developing for experienced EPs and compare this with what was happening in other LEAs. We were surprised to find that we are one of the leading services in developing peer supervision.

High ratings have been received from EPs within the service and this suggests that the four aims of the project have been met. Most importantly, the process of supervision has led to many psychologists feeling that they are emotionally healthier (thereby increasing their capacity to respond and support clients) and they feel that the quality of service provided has improved as a result of being able to explore work undertaken through supervision. We are confident that peer supervision provides a useful way to enable psychologist to continue to provide a high quality service to a diverse set of clients in an ever-changing set of political and social circumstances.