Supervising Trainee Educational Psychologists: What are the Benefits and Limitations for Supervisors and how can the Context Help or Hinder the Experience?

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Introduction

Supervision is considered to be essential to the delivery of high quality psychological services, as good supervision supports competent professional practice and ensures that ethical and legal responsibilities to clients are met (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). This could be said to be particularly pertinent to those currently in training, as they are learning about the profession and actively developing their skills and competencies.

National Context

Since 2006, the initial professional training of Educational Psychologists (EPs) has involved a training period of three years on a professional doctorate programme (BPS, 2006). The net effect of this move to a three year training programme was estimated to be a threefold increase in the number of trainee educational psychologists (TEPs) engaged in fieldwork under the supervision of local authorities. Atkinson and Woods (2007) have outlined the expectations placed upon Educational Psychology Services (EPS) to ensure they have enough EPs who are trained and supported to be supervisors. The requirements from EPSs as supervisors and what supervision should entail (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010, Page, 2007). The focus of the literature in this area has generally tended to be on aspects such as the facilitators and barriers to effective supervision (Atkinson & Woods, 2007), the skills and competencies required to effectively supervise TEPs (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010), the benefits of effective supervision for trainees and models of effective fieldwork supervision (Atkinson & Woods, 2007).

Local Context

The researcher was a TEP on placement in an EPS within a UK North West local authority (NWLA) which has a history of providing placements for TEPs from the local North West University. The EPS was supportive of the researcher and of the research itself, as EPs in the service were actively encouraged to apply to become a fieldwork supervisor for TEPs. They welcomed the idea of research which would outline the benefits and limitations of supervision for the supervisor, as this feedback would provide evidence for potential supervisors to consider. It was also an ideal setting to explore how the context and support available impacted on the EPS experience of supervising a trainee, and the facilitators and barriers experienced when doing so.

Aims

Considering the expectations on qualified EPs to offer supervision to TEPs, and the additional responsibilities this inevitably entails, very little research has been done to explore what this experience can offer EPs in terms of benefits or what the drawbacks are. Of the research that has been conducted in this area, it has been suggested that it is misguided for EPs to view supervision as something they owe to the profession and that there needs to be a shift in perspective to acknowledge that the process can enhance learning and development in both the supervisor and supervisee (Carriigton, 2004).

Figure 1. Model of the supervisors’ experience of supervising a TEP

Table 1: Research questions, data gathering method and data analysis

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<td>RQ1: What are the benefits and limitations</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with three</td>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
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<td>for an EP supervising a trainee?</td>
<td>participants within the NWLA EPS</td>
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<td>RQ2: How can the context and level of</td>
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<td>supervision impact the EPs experience of</td>
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<td>supervising a trainee?</td>
<td>and two interviews conducted with EPs</td>
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Method

The research involved qualitative data, gathered from semi-structured interviews with three participants within the NWLA EPS. One interview was conducted with the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) and two interviews were conducted with EPs. The qualitative data from the interviews was transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis, in line with the framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg.79), where the researcher engages in an active role identifying the themes.

Results

Seven broad themes were identified across the data. These were: Context; Facilitators, Potential barriers; Skills and expectations of supervision; Benefits; Difficulties or limitations and; Perceptions, supervisor attributes, relationships and communication were considered amongst the facilitators (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Facilitators for EPs supervising a TEP

 Actual barriers experienced by the participants were minimal, and consisted mainly of issues regarding time, admin support and physical space for supervision. Some potential barriers were also discussed despite not actually being experienced by the participants. Figure 5 depicts the potential barriers to effective supervision.

Figure 5. Potential barriers for EPS supervising a TEP

Conclusions

The results have demonstrated that there are numerous benefits for the supervisor as well as the supervisee in a supervisory relationship. The responses of the participants would suggest that the benefits far outweigh the limitations or difficulties, and they would also suggest that the majority of limitations can be worked around to turn them into a successful and potential benefit. Facilitators and barriers to effective, beneficial supervision for both parties were explored, and it was found that good preparation, links with the University and a supportive PEP and EPS are essential for a rewarding experience.

Whilst the three participants and their EPS appear to value supervision and consider it developmentally useful, it is apparent that some EP colleagues still harbour a negative view of supervision and may consider it a onerous task which has to be done out of duty to their EPS or to the profession. The three open-minded, forward thinking participants involved in this research highlighted that it is important to change these views and to recognize that with the right support from the EPS and the PEP, supervision can be considered a high-status activity which is rewarding, reciprocally beneficial and something that can lead to more reflective EPs, more creative EPS’ and ultimately a more forward-thinking profession (Carriigton, 2004).

References


