



An evaluation of professional supervision for teachers

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Background

We report here on a small-scale evaluation, largely qualitative, of a professional supervision project of six supervision groups mounted in four primary schools in one London borough. Place2Think provided the supervision which ran monthly over six months. The purpose was to find out the extent to which teachers found supervision useful and to understand more about how supervision was used to inform future action.

What is teacher supervision?

Professional supervision for teachers is not commonplace (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015; Lawrence, 2020; White, 2020) and models are typically borrowed and adapted from related professional contexts (eg. social work, counselling, nursing). Models that have been influential include; from counselling, Inskipp and Proctor (1993) who describe *formative* (developing skill, knowledge, understanding), *normative* (essentially monitoring) and *restorative* qualities and; from social work, Kadushin (1976) refers to *educative*, *administrative* (managerial) and supportive. The formative/educative and restorative/supportive elements have been adopted for teacher professional supervision. The normative/administrative function may be used by managers but is not included in professional supervision as considered here, which some have described as clinical supervision to differentiate it from a managerial function (Reid & Soan, 2019). Thus, the purpose of professional supervision is broadly to support teachers in dealing with their own wellbeing (restorative/supportive) and that of their pupils (formative/educative) through interaction with the supervisor and reflection on their practice from a psychological perspective. Hawkins and Shohet (2006, p.57) expand on the educative function, making explicit the notion of development 'developing the skills, understanding and capacity of the supervisees' (p.57), through reflection and discussion.

However, behind this broad description of supervision there is variability. Different models and frameworks have been used in pursuit of these goals. Egan's (2007) model proposes identifying a central issue, considering options and then planning for change. The model of supervision adopted by many educational psychologists, consistent with this, is referred to as a narrative, solution focused support structure which can work at individual or peer-group levels. Here, supervisees are invited to: 1. share experiences, often in the form of cases; 2. reflect on these, including answering questions from a peer-group; 3. analyse based on the reflection and the exposure of new ideas, and; 4. plan actions, or implementation of solutions (Rae, Cowell & Field, 2017; Hanko, 2002). Psychodynamic supervision, drawn from therapeutic and counselling disciplines, particularly focuses on developing the supervisee's skills and knowledge (Norberg, Axelsson, Barkman, Hamrin & Carlsson, 2016, p.282) using constructs from that theoretical orientation, such as, affective reactions, defence mechanisms, transference and countertransference. Elements of the supervisory process also frequently adopt core attitudes derived from the person-centred approach of Rogers (1961); i.e., empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. Reference is also made in descriptions of teacher supervision to theories around attachment (a secure base for children and the implications of this in the relationship between child and teacher), projection (eg. a child projecting negative feelings onto a teacher) and containment (eg. a teacher being unable to contain their own negative feelings in interactions with the child). Supervisors differ in the extent to which they employ this range of approaches in principle, reflecting their model of supervision, but also in practice, as they respond to those being supervised. Supervision has more than one function and focus on different functions means a different flavour of supervision, some leaning more towards the restorative and teacher

wellbeing, some more towards the educative and the relationship with the pupil, some more toward the case focused approach, some more toward a more supervisee, psychodynamic approach.

Why should it be offered to teachers?

As outlined above, two primary functions are given for supervision: supporting teacher wellbeing and; supporting pupil wellbeing. Under the teacher wellbeing function staff retention is mentioned. A number of writers have pointed to teacher stress and the 'emotional labour' involved in interacting with children, particularly those with social or emotional problems (Rae, Cowell & Field, 2017; Willis & Baines, 2017). Additionally, it is observed that other, related professions typically have clinical supervision (Willis & Baines, 2017). The DfE review of school and college staff wellbeing (DfE, 2019) reminds us that teacher also like their jobs and find them fulfilling and that job stress is probably a fairly universal phenomenon. Environment has been reported as an important factor in job stress, both generally and specifically in the case of teachers (White, 2020). Those concerned with teacher wellbeing suggest supervision as one element within a mentally healthy workplace. For example the DfE review (2019) draws six core themes from the literature concerning staff wellbeing in schools: "1) Engagement from senior leaders; 2) Implementing whole school/college approaches, 3) Provision of support, mentoring and training; 4) Fostering resilience and mindfulness; 5) Promoting healthy and active lifestyles and 6) Ensuring a positive environment, including signposting to other resources." (p24). Supervision comes under the theme 3, support, mentoring and training.

Place2Think present the following range of potential outcomes from engaging in supervision, which include both teacher wellbeing and support for children:

- Build your support networks (reduce isolation)
- Time to reflect
- Work as a team with like-minded colleagues (team collaboration/staff psychodynamics)
- Process the impact of working with mental health issues
- Understand and apply psychological concepts to your practice
- Build your capacity in role
- Enhance your own wellbeing (and that of your colleagues) (eg. managing stress)

What do teachers typically discuss

In a UK context, headteachers and teachers have reported using supervision: to share emotional experiences; for reflection on how these experiences affect them personally and their ability to work with staff, pupils and parents; to hear from others, and; to develop their professional practice by pooling knowledge and understanding (Lawrence, 2020; Reid and Soan 2018; Willis & Baines, 2017).

What is the evidence of the effects of supervision

There are two recent UK reviews of studies concerned with supporting the wellbeing of teachers (DfE, 2019; White, 2020). The White review, which focussed on intervention studies, found no rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of teacher supervision. Relevant to the current supervision project, which offered group supervision, mainly to senior leaders, the DfE review reported evidence from a number of studies that teachers particularly valued

good staff relationships, peer support networks and senior leaders “modelling and embedding wellbeing practices across the school” (AFC, 2018, p7). In a consultation of 3,000 English teachers conducted by the Anna Freud Centre, school staff were open to the idea of supervision to support them with the ‘emotional impact of their work’. Supervision was thought to be particularly useful for those with pastoral responsibilities and those working with children and families with a higher levels of need (AFC, 2018).

One rationale for providing teacher supervision is to support the mental health of their pupils. There is consistent evidence that the quality of teacher-pupil relationship is related to pupil mental health (DfE, 2019; Goetz et al., 2021; Lei, Cui & Chiu, 2016; Poulou, 2020; Sabol & Pianta, 2012) though less evidence as to which causes which. It is likely that the relationship is reciprocal, that a poor relationship with their teacher undermines the mental health of the pupil and that teachers react to the mental health of their pupils (Trang & Hansen, 2021 & Velez-Agosto et al., 2017).

Lawrence (2020), surveyed the experiences of supervision of people working directly in education, resulting in 402 responses largely from Scotland. The vast majority of those who had experienced professional supervision found it to be a positive experience. There are relatively few studies reporting on the outcomes of specific teacher supervision interventions, either in the UK or internationally, they are mainly qualitative, short-term and small scale (DfE, 2019; White, 2020). Evaluated by NatCen as part of the Talented Teacher Programme around 200 newly qualified teachers in England took part in three ‘Place2Think’ sessions. There were some difficulties with attendance which seemed to have been offered during the teaching day and therefore required cover. However, teachers appreciated an opportunity to talk about mental health issues relating to their work with pupils, and their own anxieties, to share strategies and to reflect with colleagues. The nature of these sessions was unfamiliar to teachers and some were unclear about the goals, commenting that the sessions seemed more suitable for counsellors (NatCen, 2016). Two further English small qualitative studies of teacher supervision have been identified. The first was conducted in a special school (Willis & Baines, 2017) and in the second, supervision was offered to senior staff and SENCOs in ‘a number of’ primary schools in south-east England (Reid & Soan, 2018). Willis and Baines reported that the most apparent and surprising benefit identified was the transformation in staff relationships. Comments around an increased sense of camaraderie through supporting colleagues outnumbered any other sub-theme. Relief of stress was also experienced “*it’s like a massage*”. Reid and Soan reported that participants found it “*a powerful and restorative experience, professionally, personally and emotionally*”.

In summary, there is not a strong evidence base for supervision but what there is is positive.

The present study

This is a small evaluation to gather the reactions and experiences of those who took part in the professional supervision project, with the aim of informing those working in health and education about the potential of professional supervision for teachers in enhancing teacher and pupil wellbeing and mental health. Attention is paid to a range of contextual factors in examining supervision, relating to broad national contexts and varying teacher roles within schools.

Findings

The average attendance rate across the six groups with six sessions per group was 78%, ranging from the lowest group attendance of 50% to the highest of 95%.

Survey results

Out of 43 participants in the six groups, responses received were received from 21. The response rate (49%) is quite low, principally because of the poor response from one school, making it difficult to be confident of its representativeness.

Q 1. What do you consider to be the goals of your recent supervision with Place2Think? Please read down the list of descriptors and **for those you think relevant rate your level of satisfaction**. 1 = extremely unsatisfied 😞 10 = extremely satisfied 😊. If not relevant choose the 'not relevant' circle.

	Mean
Supportive	6.8
Reflective	7.5
Cathartic (stress busting)	7.4**
Confidentiality	8.1*
Informative	6.5
Appraisal	6.4***
Challenging	5.8*
Empathetic	7.3

* One 'not relevant'/missing response

** Two 'not relevant'/missing responses

*** Three 'not relevant'/missing responses

The respondents scored above average satisfaction on all the descriptors, somewhat surprising for 'Appraisal' since there was not supposed to be an appraisal dimension to the supervision. Confidentiality, reflective, cathartic and empathetic all scored above 7, indicating a good to high rate of satisfaction.

Q 2. In terms of the costs and benefits of using time for group supervision, where do you see group supervision? Tick only one please.

Group supervision is very beneficial and well worth the time: N=4

Group supervision has some benefit and is worth the time: N=9

The costs in time and the benefits of attending group supervision are equal: N=7

The costs in time attending group supervision outweigh the benefits: N=1

The costs in time attending group supervision outweigh the benefits a lot

Responses to question 2 were at least neutral in terms of cost benefit and the majority (62%) reflected a positive evaluation of supervision.

Q 3. The aspect of the supervision appreciated most in an open question to respondents was around the opportunity to meet with colleagues to talk about work related problems and in the process reflect together, solve problems and feel less isolated. Here are three examples:

“A dedicated time to come together and reflect on quickly unfolding events over the course of the pandemic.”

“The open forum to have an opportunity to discuss challenges as they arise and plan for future.”

“Solving problems with peers.”

This sharing provided one participant with ideas of how to support their teams. Some participants also mentioned appreciating having a dedicated time for such discussion and giving them deeper insight into their colleagues and their perspectives. The opportunity to offload and to express honestly and confidentially how they were feeling during a very stressful year was mentioned. It was mentioned that a supervisor ensured everyone contributed equally and all contributions were valued and reflected on by the group.

Q. 4. Most difficult aspects reported in an open question to respondents fell principally under three broad headings around trust/sharing, lack of a clear focus for sessions and the pressure of other priorities. A number of respondents mentioned feeling uneasy about *‘saying how they truly felt’* and the presence of senior members of staff was mentioned as exacerbating this in a couple of comments. Three comments under this broad heading suggested a personal anxiety about sharing, *‘difficulty verbalising exactly how I felt in front of colleagues’* and *‘feeling I didn’t always have something to contribute’*. Lack of a clear focus or direction for sessions was mentioned along with a discomfort with ‘silences’, although this was leavened in couple of instances with the comment that sessions were nonetheless beneficial and resulted in ‘actions’. Two respondents mentioned the difficulty of committing time to the sessions against a backdrop of other pressing priorities.

Interviews with supervisors and teachers

The analysis of the interviews is reported under three main headings, reflecting key areas identified as important in previous studies and the interview structure used for the present evaluation, as follows: the model/process of supervision; the issues discussed; the outcomes experienced. However, there were important differences between groups reflecting the different contexts.

The model/process of supervision

The Place2Think offer letter to project schools provides a succinct description of their supervision:

“What is professional supervision?”

Professional supervision offers a safe, confidential space for 6 to 8 members of staff to explore, together with a trained and qualified mental health consultant, what is happening in their classroom, year group or school.

Professional supervision is high quality CPD which draws on participants’ experience to help them to examine underlying issues more fully.

Supervision is there to help participants understand and process whatever issues and concerns are top of their list that they are having to deal with in their school. During Covid, staff will be dealing with their own anxiety as well as those of pupils, families and the community.

The model on offer is a closed group that meets remotely roughly every month for 90

minutes. We can be flexible on the times and frequency of sessions on request. Over the course of the programme participants will have space to develop frameworks for thinking about issues that they can apply themselves or to help colleagues, with a reflective, non-judgemental approach.”

Sharing and reflection

Overall, consistent with the Place2Think offer letter, supervisors on this project principally described a reflective model where group members were typically asked at each meeting first to ‘check-in’ and then to identify principal concerns for discussion. Some supervisors brought up the possibility of presenting specific cases about pupils or staff and this happened to some degree in most groups but this was not the dominant structure. Teachers confirmed that sharing and reflection were their primary experience of the groups and that they had the deciding role in the topics discussed at each session. Sharing was universally reported, reflection was frequently referred to but not invariably. Several added that this was supported by supervisors making it a safe and confidential space with the qualities of good listening being encouraged. Reflection ranged over the issues described below relating to teachers, staff for whom they might be responsible and their pupils. On the whole teachers were very positive about the opportunity for sharing and reflection. One teacher commented on the novelty of this type of thinking in education:

“Reflection is something that I think as a profession, we don’t do. So it was a really different kind of meeting. We don’t do a lot of reflection... As a team, you might reflect on the children, reflect on your planning ... (not) on your team or your wellbeing or your mind-set. It was a different way of thinking....something I’ve never had to do.” (Teacher)

A point made by more than one teacher was that the supervision groups stimulated reflective practice beyond the group sessions.

“I think (reflection has) always been something I’ve struggled with, well not struggled with – I’ve always been quite reflective but not necessarily been able to come out with answers on the other side and I think it has helped because you had to come, you know, with something every time, that you may wanted to discuss and for the first few sessions I struggled to think of something and then, yeah, I was actively thinking about what I could bring to be discussed. So, yeah, it helped me become more proactive I think and be more reflective.” (Teacher)

“People had different views and things and it wasn’t, we can add all those things, but in a way that was kind of good to just plant that seed.... And then we could all go and reflect on it.” (Teacher)

The practice of supervisors to end each session by asking people to give thought to what they wanted to bring prior to the next session may have supported this. It was also mentioned by teachers in several groups that the supervisor was an important, possibly critical, facilitator in reflection, in enabling all members of the group to be heard, of skilfully questioning and steering conversations in constructive directions and of providing a safe space for discussion.

Safe space

The Place2Think model includes coverage of confidentiality and the notion of a safe space for discussion in the first supervision meeting. One supervisor described this as follows:

“When I started my sessions, with the group I felt it was really important that we built a kind of safe place for them, and part of that process is in my training as a family and systemic psychotherapist is about contracting. And they came up with the rules...so that was really important in terms of establishing trust, because I think they really wanted to know if they (could) engage in a space, that they're honest and open in this space, where does this material go?”

The sense of having a safe space for discussing issues, free from judgement, was on the whole confirmed by teachers who were interviewed and strongly valued by them, encouraging openness. Group composition seemed to work both within school teams and across schools (the headteacher group). There were some nuances relating to working with new colleagues and to having a headteacher in the group. As to be expected, trust took time to build up in newly formed groups.

“I think it got easier to talk after a couple of sessions, yes easier and then a lot of positives are coming out of it, so we were more like analysing, reflecting and I think this will be very beneficial next year as well.” (Teacher, newly formed group)

Having a headteacher present (the case in two of the four schools) had strengths and weaknesses. A strength, according to one supervisor, was that senior staff could bring ‘quite tricky things’ to the head in a non-threatening way. However, heads did still take a leadership role and possibly felt responsible for the way their school was functioning leading to reluctance to confront some issues. One supervisor remarked that this may be inhibiting:

“I felt (the manager’s) presence was interesting. And maybe a slight block on delegates really kind of opening up and I noticed that some of the sessions, where XX wasn’t there it was a little bit freer.” (Supervisor)

In a more homogeneous group one teacher enjoyed the equality:

“I think for me the biggest strength was that we were all at a similar level, so we all understood where we were all coming from.” (Teacher)

Development over time

A few teachers were familiar with professional supervision, but most were not and initially the purpose of the sessions was misunderstood by some teachers. Supervisors confirmed teachers’ lack of familiarity with professional supervision and a space to think:

“So (I) kind of start, normally if I was working clinically I’d be working with people who know what supervision is so they kind of hit the ground running a little bit with the contract, but (for the education sector) there’s much more uncertainty as to what the parameters are so I suppose I introduced more about what I saw the space to be.” (Supervisor)

“(Teachers) haven’t been used to this kind of reflective space necessarily where you are given a space to think and there is no set agenda.” (Supervisor).

In terms of development over time, some teachers entered the process “open” and unafraid to talk about things important to them. Some groups built rapport over the first sessions, developing a sense of ease and ownership of the space, becoming more confident to share personal information, more supportive and more motivated.

“We got braver I think as sessions went on.” (Teacher)

They also grew in their competence to use this unfamiliar opportunity to think about how they engaged with not only parents and children, but other stakeholders like senior management. One supervisor commented on development in the way their group used observation in reflection:

“If anything really struck me about the group, it was how they began to use observation skills....to start talking about themselves and what they observed in their children and the parents.” (Supervisor)

Overall teachers were generally unfamiliar with this kind of open discussion space but they became more comfortable, enabling them to approach more sensitive topics and some developed new skills from working with the group, enabling reflexivity.

Structure to promote educative functions

Predominantly, as described above, agendas were agreed by the group at the beginning of each session. Explicit mechanisms to develop skills, such as case presentation were not widely used. This may be partly a reflection of supervision in the time of Covid and also that the majority of the groups were for senior leaders who had a strong focus on staff rather than specifically pupil wellbeing.

“I'd leave it up to them if they wanted to bring stuff back (from the last session). What I would do is always invite them at the start, the session to check in, so to say how they're feeling how the month has been and what they wanted to use the session for and then we negotiated the agenda of the session.” (Supervisor)

Supervisors did mention introducing relevant theories to teachers work with children (attachment and projection were specifically mentioned).

“At the end of the sessions, if I had named some models, or some theorists I would send them papers on it, so I would start the session with them saying, is there anything from the last session or anything from what I sent to you that you want to bring up again and if there wasn't, then I would say okay let's make an agenda, so the agenda was set by them.” (Supervisor)

However, all the supervisors introduced ways of doing reflexivity that were consistent with a psychodynamic orientation, for example *“how you're impacted by what you experience in those interactions and dynamics with others”*. Techniques and frameworks from a counselling culture were introduced and modelled, through, for example the discussion of how projection might work from a child to a teacher, how that might feel, encouraging non-judgemental examination of those experiences and promoting a willingness to avoid seeking a quick fix.

“It was an attempt really to bring in some aspects of counselling culture some ideas from counselling that they might find useful either in the way that they dealt with the work in school and the way that they dealt themselves the impact of the work on themselves...For example, the primacy of basic listening skills...observing using reflections and what questions you might ask...(which involved) me saying ...you don't have to fix it you don't have to fix these problems that the children might be bringing for you...using some

techniques from person centered counselling that really help you to just stay with the problem without jumping to solutions.” (Supervisor)

Commenting appreciatively on one such technique one teacher saw its potential for classroom use, but had not used it.

“....take one strategy... I think it’s called active listening or something like that. One person says what the problem is for so many minutes, the other people can ask questions about that problem and then the person with the problem has just got to listen and everybody else in the group has got to discuss things and now that person with the problem has got to listen. So we did do that technique a few times..... But we haven’t put it into practice since.” (Teacher)

Teachers appreciated the opportunity to reflect but also some found the lack of formal structure unsettling.

“It felt like it was, well, what are we doing here, there’s no structure to this and you know even if it’s just, plant a little seed and see what happens around it. It was difficult not having anything sometimes, just to kind of shape the session a little bit, just a framework to hang off...” (Teacher)

It is possible that some supervisors, more experienced at working in education settings, supported a slightly more visible structure. It is also possible that teachers, unfamiliar with this kind of discussion found silence more difficult to bear, though it did not mean they disliked the sessions. The teacher quoted above as being unsettled by the lack of structure also commented:

“But I think at the end of every single (session) I felt uplifted. That was lovely, good, a lovely time that we all had together.” (Teacher)

Variation between supervisors and between groups

It is important to recognise that despite considerable consistency across groups there was also plenty of variation, in supervisors, in groups and in individuals. The three Headteachers who were the school gatekeepers had each accepted the invitation to participate in the project for their own reasons. Some supervisors were more experienced at leading groups in education settings, giving them greater knowledge of how these groups might run and also what information teachers might find useful. The way groups worked was influenced by the roles of the group members and the context of their schools and Covid. Four of the six groups were for senior leaders or head teachers and their focus was more directed toward school wide issues and supporting staff. One of the groups was in a special unit within the school and this group was more concerned with strategies in working directly with their children and also to stress related to teaching children with special needs. One group included a new head and a new deputy and so team building was a primary issue for them. One teacher talked about the ‘vulnerable community’ she worked in, with child protection cases and parents with ‘challenging behaviour’ being important in terms of managing wellbeing and mental health, both in terms of staff and pupils. Some individuals were more experienced than others in terms of supervision and its way of working. Some individuals wanted to air challenges, but not all. *“One teacher commented that if she thought too much about challenges she would feel very burdened.” (Supervisor)*

The composition of the groups in this project was largely determined strategically by headteachers to include those in leadership roles and staff with shared objectives. Teachers appeared to be alert to the members of staff with the greatest need for supervision. One interviewee considered other members of staff should have been offered this opportunity. A secondary school was also approached and heads of year, who have a challenging pastoral role, were offered professional supervision, but in this case it was left up to them as to whether or not to take part. No head of year took up the offer although three did attend an online session describing the supervision. The secondary school deputy head with pastoral responsibility commented that there was a culture of stoicism, of not needing wellbeing support. When asked about the potential value of the groups for working more effectively with pupils she thought this may not have been clear to the heads of year, it was not clear to her.

Timings of group

The monthly timetable seemed to work well, not too much, not too little. The 90 minute length of each session was also accepted as a good length on the whole. The timing of groups was typically after school, around 4pm, and whilst this is the obvious time slot avoiding the need for cover, teachers did talk about it sometimes being a rush to get there or feeling the pressure of other tasks needing their attention. Two of the groups met during school hours and this worked well for them though this had to be facilitated by cover.

Issues covered

Covid

Covid was mentioned consistently by supervisors as a dominating context within which discussions were situated. Isolation and stress were heightened. During periods when schools were closed there was the challenge of keeping in touch with the teaching team, pupils and families, and a level of anxiety associated with this.

“They talked about parents and the kids about safeguarding... being aware that basic needs will be met, and, particularly when they were doing remote.” (Supervisor)

Teachers discussed feeling out on a limb, being asked to manage things outside their normal role and being unable to access the normal avenues of support with educational psychologists and speech and language teams only working remotely. The headteacher group talked about this sense of being personally stretched and being left to get on with it. The supervision sessions gave them the opportunity to share these feelings, to offload and to feel affirmed within a group of peers.

“They were having just to be all things to all people - the stretch on the skill set... They're educationists, and yet they were being asked ... to be public health professionals. It was it was more about them and less about managing their team than in my experience working with head teachers pre-Covid... And a lack of recognition, no equivalent of clapping for carers, yeah clapping for the NHS like who's clapping for education, who's got their backs and that sense that no one had their backs” (Supervisor)

Though the supervisor also saw this as an amplification of existing issues.

“Covid just amplified things that were already maybe simmering. So yeahthere was that tension between whose role is it, social care or education, that's definitely been that's been around for a long, long time.” (Supervisor)

The need to respond to constantly changing circumstances also preoccupied discussions.

“They were reacting to that and needing to respond very quickly, constantly. They said...we are not planning as we would normally plan, organise, communicate...none of those normal things were in place.” (Supervisor)

Personal wellbeing in relation to work

Against this backdrop, the greatest focus was generally on personal wellbeing in relation to their work. Pupil/parent issues were less frequently discussed, though in the special unit, where group members worked directly with children, this was more a focus. Connecting with peers and sharing common experiences was mentioned by most, seen as taking on particular importance due to the restrictions on interaction due to Covid. Regarding their own wellbeing relating to their working lives here are some examples of topics covered:

“One group member was going through a merger with another school and talked quite openly about the challenges that raised for her and her staff to, you know, having to manage them through...It's you as a human being, then being able to deliver on your role.” (Supervisor)

“One of the things that they appreciated about these sessions was that they could have this time to share and also to normalize their anxieties and their concerns” (Supervisor)

“I think the most stark thing with that was just the way that we talked about our mental health, all of us.” (Teacher)

People talked about work life balance, the need for boundaries and sharing strategies they might use to achieve this (taking a walk at lunchtime, going to yoga, not answering emails on Saturday).

“XX group used it for a range of things, to assist and help themselves with how their thoughts and feelings were about working as teachers during the pandemic and utilizing each other as sources of support and identification of strategies...They were also keenly interested in mental health, what is mental health, so I sent them resources and videos around resources that they can use not only for themselves, but cascade to their teams that they work with, so it was a range of different things.” (Supervisor)

Planning

The group with the express goal of team building began to use the group to develop some plans:

“Towards the end very much looking forward to we're going to be able to put in new systems that need to be understood by everybody” (Supervisor)

Pupil wellbeing

There was less discussion overall about pupil wellbeing. The supervisor of one senior leaders group commented that it struck her that the focus was *“very little on thinking about children per se”*. Similarly, the supervisor of one of the non-leader groups commented:

“I think they also came in with the sense that they could talk about individual clients or pupils or parents. That wasn't as big actually. I didn't think that it felt that was as important as the

first element which was talking about themselves and the pressures of the work. I probably expected more 'here's what's happened to me with this child or with this parent' and with this large group it wasn't so much about that it was more about their own personal processes anxieties.” (Supervisor)

However, pupil wellbeing was discussed, for example using a ‘solution circle’ where a teacher would present something about a pupil or parent and the group would talk about what was involved in the case. One teacher described one way they had used reflection:

“...we’ve been using the Zones of Regulation¹ for a while.....encouraging the children to also be reflective. So often they come to you in such a state but it’s actually OK, let’s calm down and actually think about what’s happened. So yeah, I think for me it’s encouraging the children to be more reflective about their own actions or what’s upset them and how they can get back to being in a happy calm state.” (Teacher)

Outcomes

Overwhelmingly teachers reported finding the groups a positive experience, refreshing and sometimes uplifting.

“I mean it lived up to my expectations and I thought one of the things was it, you know, you come away energized, not in a sort of an excitable way but energized in the sense that you feel your batteries are being recharged.” (Teacher)

As described in the Background section, Place2Think present the following range of potential outcomes from engaging in supervision:

- Build your support networks (reduce isolation)
- Time to reflect
- Work as a team with like-minded colleagues (team collaboration/staff psychodynamics)
- Process the impact of working with mental health issues
- Understand and apply psychological concepts to your practice
- Build your capacity in role
- Enhance your own wellbeing (and that of your colleagues) (eg. managing stress)

Positive outcomes were reported by teachers and supervisors over all these categories, though different teachers got different things out of the sessions.

Building support networks and learning from each other were often linked and something frequently mentioned by different groups.

“We became a quite coalesced group...We’ve all taken it back to our schools and thought ‘you know what, we’ve got some learning here but we’ve also got things we can share and we can promote similar practices’, because I now very much want to see more supervision being an option and available to people working in schools and I don’t just mean teaching staff.” (Teacher)

¹ Zones of Regulation is a framework designed by Leah Kuypers to foster self-regulation and emotional control and quite widely used in London primary schools: <https://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html>

“It was good to be with peers experiencing the same challenges and having that time which you wouldn’t otherwise give yourself and be able to share with peers who are going through very similar challenges.” (Teacher)

“We were able to share kind of you know, nuggets of kind of wisdom.... which we’ve tried this, maybe you want to try this. So there’s been a couple of moments where we took away ideas from each other. It gave a platform to kind of air those concerns and worries but also kind of support each other in that way. Yes, there was less feeling of isolation because we knew that in a couple of weeks you’re going to have another get together and have the chance to talk.” (Teacher)

Most but not everyone felt the sharing had such positive outcomes. One teacher felt somewhat burdened by the sharing and critical of the lack of actual practical outcomes.

“I think there was time to reflect but not necessarily time for conversations about problem solving... I think we did a lot of sharing but not necessarily coming up with solutions... yeah, things were aired but then we didn’t have a chance to kind of put a plan or think about next steps... I think I almost left feeling like I’ve taken on everyone else’s baggage.” (Teacher)

Ideas were shared about how to work with parents and their worries about their children. Teachers at all levels had struggled with similar types of things. Within groups they shared what that felt like, how they might understand those feelings and the situation and how they might cope with it, think about it as a team and how managers might deal with it slightly differently to support the teachers.

Some teachers reported becoming more self-aware about their own emotional state / needs, including a reduction in an over-critical attitude to their daily work. This resonated with the intentions of supervisors to encourage teachers to recognise that in order to be effective teachers needed to feel mentally healthy themselves.

“I have a difficult class and I’ve been put to a test I would say, and there’s lots of emotional needs and the remembering about you know, stay calm. Basically there’s so many needs in the class I’ve got now and I’ve questioned myself...have I given my best? At the same time I questioned myself, what are you doing for yourself to do your best?” (Teacher)

“I guess it was more like a journey of self-knowledge. And something specific I was saying we understood our own emotional wellbeing and how that impacted on our ability and function and then through that we were more effective at recognising in others. I think it’s not maybe so much knowledge, as just developing awareness and skill talking....” (Teacher)

This awareness fed into how some understood meeting their pupils’ mental health needs and illustrated that they were using their own feelings to better understand those of their pupils, though others barely referred to reflect on their practice.

“I’m doing far more now and I have been doing the Zones of Regulation. We’ve got those kinds of regulations....so green is happy, blue sad, yellow when you feel frustrated and red when you feel anger. So, I’ve been doing this on a daily basis so children have an opportunity to express how they feel throughout the day. Many children you know are not very happy sometimes and I can tell by their body language that we need to talk about it. I’ve taken a lot from the course. When I was talking about myself and thinking about my own experiences and how I feel about certain situations and just like having that transition and

thinking about the children how they may feel and what they may be going through is also helpful and beneficial” (Teacher)

One supervisor described one teacher’s comment as follows:

“I used to just scream and shout at students to try and control them but after engaging in conversations in this space I realized that you know I need to be regulated before I try to support and resonate at the children.” (Supervisor reporting what a teacher participant had said)

Supervisors also reported some instances where teacher fed back scenarios where they had changed their behaviour as a result of supervision.

“In response to difficulty with coping with a challenging student: (The teacher) said that, you know, occupying a different space, not showing how much the child was getting to him being compassionate towards the child’s story, (the child had a family, a history of difficulties) to try and understand why the child acting in that way that gives you more patience to tolerate.” (Supervisor)

“One teacher was working like conflict resolution, working with a junior member of staff, and it was problematic for him, he was finding it very challenging. So, as a group we shared some ideas and the next session he came along and said well I’ve started to implement these ideas, and I think it’s working better.” (Supervisor)

But discussions did not always lead to change:

“If I’m thinking about my own wellbeing at the moment it’s not very good.... You’re always thinking about the people I always put myself second, you know, I put my job first you know...I mean one of the things we did talk about was how are we going to try and do things for ourselves, what little changes we’re going to make, to try to make ourselves, you know look after ourselves. That’s something that I said I would do and I didn’t do it and I’m annoyed that I didn’t do it. I am going to try because that’s still in my head, you know.” (Teacher)

Some teachers felt the sessions were worthwhile, refreshing, an opportunity to meet enjoyably and supportively with colleagues, but were vague about their function and their beneficial outcomes. Not everyone mentioned emotional wellbeing or self-awareness. Not everyone felt that solutions to problems with pupils had been a notable outcome.

Discussion / Conclusion

All 12 teacher interviewees expressed positive opinions about the supervision sessions. No one felt they had been a waste of time and all talked about things they had got out of it. There were minor 'niggles' about their timing and length and several critical comments about the level and form of the supervision, but such negative feedback was more than countered by expressions of admiration, commendation and appreciation of how the facilitators had performed their role. Yes, the refusal of facilitators to 'take control' had frustrated some, but most could see the reason for it and realized that it was an important part of the process. The inevitable silences disturbed some people, but that can be seen as a common reaction amongst teachers in general – hence the habit of 'jumping in' far too quickly and 'short circuiting' the thinking of their pupils. Silence is almost perceived as a failure, a weakness, a threat even.

This matched teachers' responses to the survey that were generally quite strongly positive and at worst neutral, with the attendance rate which was good (average of 78%) and with previous studies reported in the Background section. The issues raised by the larger sample canvassed in the survey mirrored the issues raised in the interview, on the positive side the opportunities for sharing ideas, experiences and feelings and on the negative side the difficulties with opening up to colleagues and the sense of competing priorities. The interviews unpacked these reactions in much greater detail.

The primary structure and character was reflective and psychodynamic. There was some discussion of specific challenges with pupils, parents and staff but this was much less prominent in most groups. Likely this reflects the stance on supervision from a clinical culture rather than the 'narrative, solution focused' approach adopted by English educational psychologists. There may be some mileage in adjusting this for an education perspective, a point also mentioned by the TPP evaluators (NatCen, 2015). There was some indication that P2T supervisors more experienced at working in education settings learnt more in that direction.

Consistent with this clinical flavour, teachers used the sessions particularly to reduce a sense of isolation and stress and to address their psychological wellbeing relating to their work. Nearly everyone reported that supervision improved their lives in these respects. Several people mentioned that they came away from sessions feeling refreshed, de-stressed, energised. Beyond this, individual teachers took away different lessons from the sessions, becoming more reflective about the psychological processes going on in interactions at work, being more observant and analytical about everyone's emotions in challenging situations, being more willing to look after themselves and to think about this with reference to staff they managed, being able to apply these understandings to their work with children and being able to pick up strategies from their peers to address all these issues. There was a strong sense over the different groups that discussion focused mostly on teacher wellbeing and less on that of pupils. Arguably teacher wellbeing improves pupil wellbeing and indeed some teachers used their own self-awareness to gain greater insight into the emotional lives of their pupils. Also, teachers used supervision as a space to model a range of understandings that then cascaded down to their interaction with colleagues, pupils and parents. Nonetheless, more explicit coverage of the educative/formative elements of supervision may make supervision more attractive to schools. There is a caveat to this. This project ran during the Covid pandemic, during a time when schools were in lockdown,

where classes operated in bubbles, where everything was different and planning was hugely disrupted. The attention on staff, their stress, their isolation, was influenced by these circumstances to a degree, a point confirmed by supervisors with experience of supervision before Covid.

It would be a mistake to ignore the variation across groups. In this small project senior leaders were predominantly selected by headteachers to take part. The importance of senior leaders in setting the tone for the management of wellbeing in schools makes this a sensible choice. Leadership groups had somewhat different agendas. Those working with pupils and families with additional needs and those with onerous pastoral responsibilities may particularly appreciate professional supervision. The small English studies on teacher supervision, reported above (Reid & Soan, 2018; Willis & Baines, 2017) involved SENCOs and a special school. The DfE review of supporting teacher wellbeing remarked that: '*Poor behaviours, including persistent disruption among students, are reported to have a negative impact on teacher wellbeing - particularly in secondary schools*' (DfE 2019, p21). Relevant to this quote, all the schools taking part in this project were primary schools. It was also offered to secondary schools but no secondary teachers took up the offer. It is unclear why that was the case but that would seem to be something worth exploring further.

The background literature suggests that teacher supervision is probably best embedded within a wider school attention to mental health and wellbeing (AFC, 2018; DfE, 2019; White, 2020) if teacher and pupil wellbeing are to be seriously tackled. The NatCen (2016) evaluation of the Talented Teacher Programme, which included Place2Think sessions concluded that the effects of the programme were not sustained in the longer-term and that the benefit of support and mentoring may be dependent on being embedded within schools over time.

There is a cautionary note to the findings reported here. The schools were self-selecting and so all were at least somewhat onboard with the idea of supervision prior to the start of the project. This is in fact a reflection of implementation in the real world where schools will purposively choose to introduce supervision. The teachers surveyed and interviewed were self-selecting and so may not be representative of the participants as a whole, although their responses agreed well with those of their supervisors, all five of whom were interviewed.

In conclusion, teachers found supervision a positive experience providing them with a sense of relief from stress, an opportunity to talk to colleagues in a more psychologically reflective way than they would otherwise and a place to learn from others. The experience helped some be more reflective about their practice beyond the sessions and to manage better their interactions with pupils. To fully realise the opportunities that professional supervision offers it may be good to strengthen teachers' understandings of the ways in which it can benefit their pupils. Nonetheless, it is refreshing to see teachers themselves being the focus of attention and support, something which might be anticipated also to benefit pupils.

Methods

Methodology

Data collection was carried out online and comprised:

- A questionnaire to all individual members of staff participating in the supervision programme completed online using Qualtrix
- Interviews conducted via Zoom using the recording and caption functions: with supervision groups; with all head teachers or delegated members of the school SLT; with Place2Be staff providing supervision
- Process data of supervisions: the number of supervisees per group; the percentage attendance per group.

Sample

64 primary and secondary schools in a London borough were approached with an offer of six Place2Think professional supervision sessions for one or more groups per school. Four primary schools took up the offer. One secondary school showed initial interest but no teachers elected to take part.

Six professional supervision groups ran over the period December 2020 – June 2021: a headteacher group (N = 3) and; five teacher groups (ranging in size between 7 and 9), one group per school and in one school a further group from a special unit within the school for children with autism. The groups were supervised by five different Place2Think supervisors, with one supervisor taking on two groups.

Twenty-one teachers responded to the questionnaire out of 43 who participated in the supervision (response rate = 49%). Three of the four headteachers were interviewed and nine members of staff drawn across all the schools. Headteachers were interviewed individually, other members of staff were interviewed in pairs except in the school with two groups where three members of staff, representing both groups, were interviewed together. All the Place2Think supervisors were interviewed individually. The deputy head at the secondary school who had acted as a liaison for the supervision project was interviewed. Data on percentage attendance for each group was provided by Place2Think.

Measures used for data collection

The questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedules were devised to include coverage of strengths and weaknesses perceived by different stakeholders. The questionnaire was adapted from Soni (2015). The semi-structured interview schedules were informed by similar previous evaluations. In preliminary conversations with Place2Be staff the following list of issues/potential outcomes was identified and these helped in providing a structure for the instruments;

- Understanding of mental health issues and their impact within stakeholders
- Considering mental health issues as part of your decision making
- Sense of agency in managing a crisis
- Capacity to manage change within the school community
- Your efficacy in managing stress

- Your understanding of staff psychodynamics
- Understanding of staff psychodynamics on team collaboration
- Your capacity to develop strategic interventions with emotional wellbeing in mind
- Your own emotional wellbeing
- Understanding and making use of ideas relevant to your school context
- Enabling you to use practical strategies you can apply to your context
- Providing personal assurance about your role
- Source of peer support

The interview schedule for teachers and Head Teachers (see Appendix A) contained questions in two broad categories:

Outcomes: 6 questions exploring the impact of the programme on the interviewee.

Processes: 8 questions focusing on how the sessions were supervised and their content.

The interview schedule for the Supervisors (see Appendix B) similarly covered Processes and Outcomes.

Participants who volunteered to be interviewed, were interviewed using Zoom either individually, in pairs or groups of three. The timings were chosen by them to fit in with their freedom from professional duties.

Recording and analysis

The interviews used the Zoom recording and caption functions and the transcripts were downloaded for analysis and reporting. The researchers devised a three part thematic structure for the analysis of the teacher / Head Teacher interviews: session processes; content of the sessions; session outcomes. Reading through the transcripts, items emerged in each of these three themes and were listed to form a coding frame which was then used for the detailed analysis of each interview (see Appendix C). The results of this analysis were as reported above.

Ethics

Schools and supervisors were advised at the outset that the supervisions would be evaluated by an external agency. Prior to attending the interviews teachers and supervisors received an information sheet about the project and a consent form, making it clear that their participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary, that the interviews would be recorded but would only be available to the two-person research team. Before each interview the interviewer asked permission to record the meeting. Prior to starting data collection the project received ethics approval from the UCL IOE research ethics committee: Data protection registration number: Z6364106/2021/04/106.

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APPENDIX A: schedule for interviews of teachers and Head Teachers

Outcomes

- **Build your support networks (e.g. Peer support)**
 - Was there a reduction in your feelings of isolation? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – explain your answer.*
- **Did the sessions give you time to reflect? Y/N**
 - *If YES follow up questions - explain*
- **Work as a team with like-minded colleagues (team collaboration/staff psychodynamics)**
 - Were you confident to say what you really thought, talk about any issue? Y/N
 - Are there things you felt it difficult to discuss in the group? Y/N
 - *Follow up questions for YES and NO – give examples and / or reasons*
 - Were there things discussed/interpretations that you struggled with, didn't agree about? Y/N
 - *Follow up questions for YES and NO – give example/s and / or reason/s*
- **Process the impact of working with mental health issues**
 - Do you now have greater self-awareness? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
 - Do you understand and apply psychological concepts to your practice? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- **Build your capacity in role**
 - What new knowledge has been learnt that wasn't known before supervision took place? (e.g. Understanding mental health issues and impact on you and your pupils)
 - Have the sessions improved your confidence? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – explain and give example/s*
 - What new skills have been applied as a result of supervision?
 - How has your work with pupils developed/changed in the area of responding to their behaviour/mental health issues?
 - Have you developed strategic interventions with EWB in mind? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
 - Are you making use of ideas relevant to your school context)? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up question – give example/s*
- **Did the sessions enhance your own wellbeing (and that of your colleagues) (e.g. Managing stress)? Y/N**
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*

Processes

- Was there a contract of supervision (will check with supervisors)? Y/N
- **Time spent on sharing issues about children?**
 - Did you prepare cases for presentation at the group? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
 - Did the group return to cases previously presented to hear about how ideas had worked? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- How did the group choose what to discuss?
- Was there a progression through the six sessions, e.g. Did you discuss your current experiences in practice more at the beginning? Y/N

- Did your analysis of how to interpret these experiences change over the course of the group? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- Did action planning come into your discussions and if so did that evolve over the course of the group? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- **Barriers/facilitators to attending?**
 - Did you attend all the sessions? Y/N
 - What support was available from your school which enabled you to prioritise this time? (Head Teacher sign-off, LA support, cover provided, none, group was outside school hours)
 - If you didn't attend all the sessions what were the obstacles to attending? (School matters, time of day, not bonding with the group, didn't receive the links in time, not what I had expected, personal reasons, illness – and there may be any number of further obstacles)
 - If you **did** attend all sessions what do you put that down to?

Strengths and Weaknesses

- Greatest strength of the group for you - *examples*
- Greatest weakness of the group for you - *examples*

APPENDIX B: schedule for interview of supervisors

Supervisor interview

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me about your experience of the Place2Think supervision project in XXXX – greatly appreciated. I want to ask you about how you ran the supervision, about what were the main issues you felt the teachers wanted to discuss and what you think they got out of the session.

Model of supervision

- Was there a contract of supervision (responsibilities of both parties, expectations of supervision, boundaries/confidentiality, how difficulties might be handled, practical arrangements? Y/N
- Could you describe the model of supervision you offered? (is that the Place2Think model?)
- Did you have to induct the teachers into the supervision process? (if yes, how did you do that?)
- Do you think they came into the experience with expectations? (If yes, what do you think these were? Did they change?)
- **Time spent on sharing issues about children/staff issues?**
 - Did teachers prepare cases for presentation at the group? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
 - Did the group return to cases previously presented to hear about how ideas had worked? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- How did the group choose what to discuss?
- Was there a progression through the six sessions, e.g. Did teachers discuss their current *experiences* in practice more at the beginning? Y/N
- Did their analysis of how to interpret these experiences change over the course of the group? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- Did action planning come into your discussions and if so did that evolve over the course of the group? Y/N
- What would you say were the main issues on their minds?

Outcomes – now I am really taking you through the outcomes XXXX suggested to participants in Place2Think that the might experience

- **Did they build support networks (eg. Peer support)**
 - Was there a reduction in feelings of isolation? .
 - *If necessary probe for the what support networks were developed*
- **Did the sessions give teachers time to reflect?** Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions - explain*
- **Did they work as a team with like-minded colleagues (team collaboration/staff psychodynamics)**
 - Were they confident to say what they really thought, talk about any issue? Y/N
 - Were there things some felt it difficult to discuss in the group? Y/N
 - *Follow up questions for YES and NO – give examples and / or reasons*

- Were there things discussed/interpretations that some teachers struggled with, didn't agree about? Y/N
- *Follow up questions for YES and NO – give example/s and / or reason/s*
- **Process the impact of working with mental health issues**
 - Did they improve their understanding and application of psychological concepts to their practice? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
- **Building their capacity in role**
 - What new knowledge was learnt that wasn't known before supervision took place? (eg. Understanding mental health issues and impact on themselves, and their pupils)
 - Did the sessions improved their confidence ? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – explain and give example/s*
 - What new skills were applied as a result of supervision?
 - How did their work with pupils develop/change in the area of responding to pupils behaviour/mental health issues?
 - Did folks develop any strategic interventions with emotional wellbeing in mind? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
 - Did teachers make use of or planning to make use of ideas relevant to their school context)? Y/N
 - *If YES follow up question – give example/s*
 - *If necessary probe for changes or plans for change to school policy; support for staff to access professional supervision in future; changes/plans for change aimed at internal school organisational practice & culture in terms of EWB.*
- **Did the sessions enhance teachers own wellbeing (eg. Managing stress)? Y/N**
 - *If YES follow up questions – give example/s*
 - links in time, not what I had expected, personal reasons, illness – and there may be any number of further obstacles)
 - If you **did** attend all sessions what do you put that down to?
 - How did your teachers attend supervision (eg. end of the school day, etc,) (*probing for whether or not head put cover in place*).

This group – was it similar to other groups you have facilitated – was there anything particular about this group that we haven't covered?

Anything else? Thank you.

APPENDIX C: thematic coding frame for analysis of teacher/Head Teacher interviews

A. Content

- i. Expectations
- ii. Personal/non-school issues
- iii. Professional/school issues
- iv. Pupil needs/ issues
- v. Other (cases/parents)

B. Outcomes

- i. Space/time/safety
- ii. Sharing/learning/picking up ideas (some implemented)
- iii. Reflection / self-awareness
- iv. Helping my role/ capacity building
- v. wellbeing / anxiety/ mental health/ therapeutic processes
- vi. open-ness/ lack of judgement
- vii. support/ common experiences/connecting with colleagues
- viii. psychology of pupil/teacher interactions/ made +/- explicit
- ix. different PoV/ role dependent

C. Processes

- i. Timing/spacing of sessions/ monthly
- ii. Supervision / form and level
- iii. Sessions in paid hours
- iv. Composition of group
- v. Effects of Covid context