The perceived benefits and difficulties in introducing and maintaining supervision groups in a SEMH special school.

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Abstract

Supervision groups are often used in professional settings and are introduced to address and provide support in relation to the challenges that arise in everyday practice. Although group supervision is common amongst a range of helping professions, its use in schools is rare. Little research exists as to the merits and challenges of providing school staff with a confidential space in which to discuss and reflect upon their practice alongside colleagues. This research took place in a social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) special school a highly pressured context where staff work with pupils with SEMH special needs, and the challenging behaviours they display. This study involved 12 school staff and examined the perceived benefits and difficulties of introducing and maintaining effective group supervision groups. Data were gathered through semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Transcripts were subsequently analysed thematically using qualitative data analysis software. Findings indicated that attending group supervision provided participants with the opportunity to foster a greater sense of camaraderie with their colleagues, and address the issue of stress through the offloading, sharing and validating of emotions and experiences. Although few difficulties were reported, important factors to consider are the need to ensure sessions are chaired by an effective, independent supervisor. Ensuring all supervisees are given a voice within a group appears to be an essential part of the supervisor's role. Establishing a method of evaluating group supervision as a means of maintaining its effectiveness is also explored.

Keywords: group supervision, pressures of teaching SEMH pupils, relieving teacher stress, staff camaraderie, reflective practice, shared experiences.

This research set out to examine the perceived benefits and difficulties of introducing and maintaining supervision groups (often prefixed with the term clinical) for staff working in a social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) special school. Group supervision is a means of encouraging and allowing staff working in a profession involving the helping of others to enter into reflective discussions about their work. Supervision is introduced to offer support in relation to the challenges that arise in everyday practice. As the deputy headteacher of a primary school (school M) that caters for pupils with SEMH special needs that have been excluded from mainstream schools because of their challenging behaviour, the first author is aware that such practice involves working in a challenging environment that can impact negatively on the professionals responsible for the education and safeguarding of the pupils. This environment can result in high staff turnover or absence and a perceived lack of staff cohesion resulting from a negative environment where physical and verbal abuse from pupils occur regularly.

Wishing to address a recognised deficiency in staff morale as a perceived result of these conditions, the senior leadership team (SLT) at school M invited an external speaker (a school counsellor and group psychotherapist with over 35 years' experience of working with and publishing texts on young people and the professionals who support them) to address staff at a whole school in-service training day, held in January 2015. The focus of the day was how to address and improve staff relations. It featured discussion and information regarding how employees live and work with supporting challenging behaviour, and the effects this has on them, and what steps can be taken to assist them. As such, following the training day, the decision was made by the school leaders to establish supervision groups to help staff reflect upon their practice in a facilitated and confidential forum. The services of the aforementioned psychotherapist were secured to supervise the groups, and he was instructed to report to the SLT any operational issues that might arise. Two supervision groups, involving a total of

twelve volunteer staff members, were launched in February 2015. The aims of the groups were to support staff working in difficult circumstances by providing opportunities to discuss with their associates the social and emotional pressures and challenges that working in a SEMH special school pose and, through the process, improve cohesion amongst colleagues. Following positive feedback from the supervisees attending the groups, a third group was subsequently established in September 2015.

Definitions, Benefits and Difficulties of Supervision

Carroll (2007) suggested supervision originated with Freud entering into group discussions with colleagues who wished to examine their clients' work. In doing so, the 'supervisor' and 'supervisees' work in partnership to address and examine challenges that arise in professional practice. Hess (1980) defines supervision as 'a quintessential interpersonal interaction with the general goal that one person…meets with another…in an effort to make the latter more effective in helping people' (25). When not centred on the working environment, supervision is said to be psychotherapy or counselling (Carroll, 2007). Now in its fourth edition, Hawkins and Shohet's work entitled *Supervision in the Helping Professions* (2012, 5) refines their definition as:

> "Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients, themselves as part of their client practitioner relationships and the wider systemic context, and by doing so improves the quality of their work, transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession".

Regarding the benefits and difficulties seen to exist within supervision, with specific reference to its use in groups, Abels (1977) believed that supervision in groups brings "about conceptual change in people's lives [due to it being] closer to the natural way in which people change and grow" (176). That said, Grigg (2006) cited research by Ray and Altekruse (2000)

which suggests that group and individual supervision are equally effective in developing skills. Despite this, the merits of supervision are often considered unsubstantiated by empirical evidence (Wolsey and Leach, 1997; Yegdich and Cushing, 1998). This is no surprise given the confidential nature of their context and use and the belief that the human complexities involved make it difficult to measure the impact of supervision in a tangible fashion (Hawkins and Shohet, 1989).

Wenger (1998) believed group supervision promotes a community of networked learning. Hawkins and Shohet (1989) suggested a "greater empathic range" (95) is achieved when bringing together persons of different ages, gender and race. Additionally, a shared understanding is also an advantage of group work. In a study of 25 teachers involved in supervision groups, Jackson (2008) found that teachers attending such groups are likely to know one another and be familiar with each other's work. As a result, they are able to offer both subjective and informed viewpoints.

While supervision groups are increasingly being recommended in order to support the development and mental health of staff in schools (Appleby, Shirbman and Eisenstadt, 2006), there has been little research examining the efficacy or perceived effectiveness of these groups for practice or staff wellbeing. In one of the few studies that has examined the use of supervision groups to support teachers in schools, Jackson (2002) found that group supervision in schools can lead to greater peer consultation, and, thus, fosters an unconscious support network across an organisation. This study was based on the completion of anonymous questionnaires by 25 teachers involved in supervision groups. Jackson also reported that engagement in group supervision saw 92 per cent of respondents develop a better understanding of challenging behaviours, and 88 per cent reported improvements in their ability to manage disruptive pupils. However, although undertaken in response to concerns around how best to support staff working with pupils at risk of social alienation and

suicide the research provided few details about the backgrounds of participating teachers, and there is little to suggest that they worked within SEMH special schools or with particularly challenging students. Furthermore, few details were provided about the methodology underpinning this research. Jackson (2008) also noted how supervision groups provide opportunities for staff to explore protection and prevention when sharing their concerns about pupils at risk of self-harm. His most compelling finding was that supervision provided staff that were normally unwilling to reveal their weaknesses, a safe environment in which to share and examine their anxieties and limitations, whilst also offering validation and a sense of joint understanding amongst colleagues.

When considering the role of group supervision within an organisation, de Hann (2012) highlighted further benefits. A supervisor working with different groups of individuals can ascertain shared trends amongst colleagues, and, when done so anonymously, can feed these patterns back to the organisation providing the supervision.

Morton-Cooper and Palmer (2000) further suggest that supervision benefits the supervisees, the organisation, and the supervisor. They argue supervisees develop a professional identity that leads to greater job satisfaction and the organisation benefits from a more motivated workforce whose clients are better served by its staff. Through fostering professional development, supervision can also provide personal satisfaction to the supervisee. Nevertheless although the Care Quality Commission (2013) supports the use of supervision, it does not recognise the indirect importance of supervision groups for the client group.

Hawkins and Shohet (1989) highlighted several areas that may impact negatively on effective supervision: previous experiences of supervision, personal inhibitions, difficulties in the supervisory relationship, organisational barriers, practical barriers, and organisation culture. A person's previous experience of supervision may affect his or her willingness to

enter into future supervision because he or she may already have experienced poor practice, such as a breach in confidentiality (de Hann, 2012). Alternatively, the same individual, who previously found supervision to be of worth, may make negative comparisons when working with a new group or supervisor. Personal inhibitions might see participants recoil from discussing their work with others for fear of being judged. Indeed, contributing within a group setting takes courage and self-discipline (Proctor, 2008).

Focusing on the supervisor and supervisee relationship, Hanko (1999) emphasises the importance of a supervisor's ability to listen to the supervisees' emotions in a proactive fashion. Hanko pointed to Steinberg's (1989) notion of the supervisor needing to become 'educated' by the participants. The role requires the supervisor to 'accept and work with these feelings in relation to the members' professional task rather than ignoring them or in other ways collusively re-enacting the teachers' own inappropriate behaviour' (124). The danger is that an untimely or ill-informed interjection may make a matter worse. Group supervisors are responsible for choosing and applying suitable interventions (Conyne, 1996). Underpinning such matters, Getzel and Salmon (1985) believed a successful supervisor requires a good working knowledge of group dynamics.

Organisational barriers concern the hierarchical structure in which supervision is provided, and the personnel providing it. For example, in those instances where in-house, top down support is offered, a conflict of interest between management and a workforce may exist. Conyne (1996) highlights that such dual relationships are of ethical concern. A supervisee is likely to tread carefully when offering opinions if supervised by a line manager who may later be called upon to provide a reference or recommend promotion within a setting.

Practical barriers involve those of geography and economics, where those wishing to participate in supervision are unable to gain access to it. These factors may also be due to

cultural barriers. For example, in presenting Hillman's (1979) idea that we are raised to become independent, Hawkins and Shohet (1989) examined the notion that as employees we are conditioned to believe we must be strong, and unlikely to want to admit a need for support.

Consideration must also be given to the fact that, compared to individual supervision, an individual's "talk time" within a group is less. As Hawkins and colleagues (2006; 2012) point out, it takes a skilled supervisor to ensure all participants can contribute sufficiently. If an equal or appropriate level of contribution to discussions is not achieved, "misused and wasted potential in a group can create boredom, anxiety and purposelessness" (Proctor, 2008, 19). Nevertheless, despite the drawbacks of group supervision, the advantages are generally see to outweigh the difficulties (de Hann, 2012; Proctor, 2008).

Pressures Involved in Teaching

The above concerns are pertinent given the findings of recent research into the mental health of UK teachers funded by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) which identified that stress is the most complex health issue facing the profession (Rothi, Leavey and Loewenthal, 2010). Rothi et al. cite research by Sleegers (1999), indicating that 48 per cent of headteachers felt the issue of staff stress took up most of their time. Research conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) (2007) suggested 44 per cent of teachers in England and Wales find their duties very or extremely stressful, with 90 per cent referring to an increase in stress levels because of the job.

In America, stress results in swathes of teachers leaving the profession (Smith and Ingersoll, 2004). Ischinger (2008), Director of Education for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), drew on an international survey of 23 countries to suggest that up to half of newly qualified teachers leave the profession at an early stage of

their careers due to a sense of low self-efficacy. She pointed to pupil behaviour and challenging classroom environments as the main reported reasons for these departures. The English Department for Education (2010) also suggested that a common fear amongst undergraduates considering teaching is that of 'not being safe in our schools' (25). Furthermore, Ingersoll and Strong's (2011) report that up to 50 per cent of American teachers leave the profession within five years of taking up their post because of inadequate support being provided to them. However, Bingham (2013) suggested that organisations where staff wellbeing is promoted will have lower staff turnover, with increased staff retention leading to a "more motivated and fulfilled workforce" (28). Such concerns lend themselves to considering group supervision as a method of addressing staff emotional welfare.

Pressures Involved in Teaching SEMH Pupils

Concerns about teacher stress, mental wellbeing and drop out of the profession become ever more focused in relation to those working with SEMH pupils. These professionals routinely experience a sense of being deskilled by challenging behaviour or by helplessness when supporting pupils, some of whom face domestic or substance abuse in the home (Center and Steventon, 2001; Cross and Billingsley, 1994). In research on teachers' working lives and effectiveness, Day (2011) suggested that a teacher's ability to maintain commitment to the profession is linked to their ability to cope with the emotional demands of the job. This is likely to be increasingly important as there have been increases in the number of pupils identified with SEMH special needs, and disruptive behaviour continues to be an ongoing issue for schools (Jull, 2009).

The following account contextualises the issues facing staff working with SEMH pupils. It forms part of a report that staff at school M are legally required to complete following the physical management of a pupil.

Adam was angry and ran off. Miss Smith pursued him and found Adam in the safe space. He became violent, kicking and punching Miss Smith. Assistance was called for. Miss Wood arrived to offer support. Adam became more aggressive. He spat in the face of both members of staff. To keep all present safe, it was agreed that Adam should be held in a sitting T wrap hold. This decision was made in Adam's best interests and in accordance to his positive handling plan. Adam was held for a total of one hour. He shouted sexually explicit remarks throughout, attempted to bite numerous members of staff, and made a range of false allegations against the adults present.

When seen alongside the belief that "teachers frequently experience a whole range of unpleasant feelings towards pupils including frustration, anger, despair and at times even hatred" (Jackson, 2002, 141), more steps should be taken to address the impact that challenging behaviour has on staff working within SEMH schools.

The concept of projective identification plays an important part in the above experiences. Shohet described projective identification as our ability to "induce feelings in others that are in ourselves" (1999, 427). Ogden (1992) stated the "projector has the unconscious fantasy of ridding himself of unwanted aspects of the self; depositing those unwanted parts in another person, with the hope that the other person will be able to process what the projector couldn't for himself" (11). Considering SEMH pupils experience difficulty in directly communicating the often complex nature of their underlying anxieties (Cross, 2011; St Clair et al. 2011), this form of communication is very likely to exist (Shohet, 1999). It could, therefore, be claimed that staff working with SEMH pupils unconsciously absorb much of the negativity, aggression and disturbing behaviour presented to them, and reflect it back to their colleagues and the children they support. Reflecting on a lifetime of clinical practice, Hinshelwood (2001) examined the way these dynamics are played out in the workplace. He suggested that absorbed feelings are further projected onto one's peers: "the emotional tone, affecting one and then another and another, appears to travel through the network like a ball on a pinball table" (131). He supported this 'mirroring' with reference to

Foulkes' (1975) belief that individuals sequentially impact on their colleagues by the mere fact of working together.

Establishing Effective Group Supervision

When considering any form of continuing professional development (CPD), Bubb and Earley (2009) and Earley and Porritt (2014) argued schools should first examine how any intervention will impact on pupils. In agreement with this, Hawkins and Shohet (2012) pointed to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (1987) when stating that the primary purpose of supervision is to benefit the client group. This resonates with Proctor's (2008) suggestion that the first stage in implementing good group supervision is to define the purpose of the group. When this is the case, and having established an evidential baseline, schools are then better placed to evaluate CPD outcomes (Bubb and Earley, 2009). What Proctor (2008) failed to address is the need to make sure these aims are made explicit to potential supervisees. Williamson and Harvey (2001) provided evidence that the biggest hurdle facing institutions wishing to introduce supervision is "their own lack of experience and some lingering misconceptions around what clinical supervision was and wasn't" (144). Hanko (1995) advocated practice aiming to avoid a "forestall division" (104) that might occur between those who form a supervision group and those who do not.

On a practical level, Jackson (2008) presented the most extensive and relevant guidance on how best to establish and maintain effective group supervision in schools. According to this advice, before supervision groups are arranged, schools should review the context, structure and setting in which they might take place. There is also a need to agree on the timing and duration of sessions, with supervision groups taking place before school starts being the recommended ideal: when staff "have (probably) not yet been pounced on by pupils, parents or managers with multiple demands on their time" (63).

In order to foster the confidence and togetherness of any group, sessions should run for an hour, on a weekly or fortnightly basis (Hanko, 1995; Jackson, 2008). Linked to this is the construct of co-rumination (the excessive discussing of problems with peers). Haggard, Robert and Rose (2010) drew on developmental research to suggest co-rumination has both positive (closeness and increased job satisfaction) and negative effects (dwelling leads to depression). In what was said to be the first study of the construct amongst adult workers, the authors suggested an understanding of co-rumination is useful when offering staff different models of support. That said, regardless of when supervision occurs, and for how long, the need for managers to protect this time is essential if participants are able to attend and develop trust and relationships within a group (Bond and Holland, 1998).

An important consideration when setting up supervision groups is composition. According to Bond and Holland (1998), participants should engage in supervision on a voluntary basis. Jackson (2008) also felt that effective working relationships develop better when senior leaders are not represented within a group, his thinking being that school staff are less likely to take risks in sharing their anxieties in front of their line managers, and vice versa. However, he fell short of suggesting that those in management positions should also seek out their own form of supervision. In considering the ideal group size to facilitate effective group supervision, a review of literature by Jacobs, Masson and Harville (2002) recommends groups of four to eight members.

Consideration should also be given to contracting. It is important to agree clear guidelines as to how group supervision will operate. Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) examination of contracting explored the ground rules of confidentiality, attendance and timekeeping. Their work presents a need to clarify the roles and expectations of both the supervisor and supervisees. This point is made even more important given the view that teachers should not expect the supervisor to provide them with a "menu of magical solutions

to solve any problem" (Jackson, 2008, 66). There is a need, from the outset, to explore learning agendas with regard to what participants may or may not want to get out of supervision. Jackson (2008) suggests these may morph over time as the group develops and becomes more accustomed to the practice of self-reflection amongst peers. Strategies for audit and evaluation should be in place to help establish effective group supervision (Hadfield, 2001), and the opportunity to renegotiate group rules and contracts should also be in place (Proctor, 2008) as they may be necessary as group dynamics develop. However, Jackson acknowledged a potential misuse of supervision, suggesting a group might "seduce the facilitator into establishing some sort of subversive anti-school, [or] alternative leadership group" (2008, 70). If this is not to be the case, the need to agree an interim system for management of supervision work should be arranged at inception (Proctor, 2008).

This Study

As noted already, although supervision groups are increasingly being recommended and used in educational settings the literature on their effectiveness and use is relatively scarce. This research therefore aimed to understand the perceptions of staff in a SEMH school in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of involvement in supervision groups. By focusing on the experiences of those attending supervision at this setting, rather than the content of the sessions, this study explores the extent to which supervision impacts on those working at a SEMH school. The study aimed to address the following research question: *What are the perceived benefits and difficulties in introducing and maintaining supervision groups for staff working in a SEMH special school?*

Method

This research takes the form of a case study since it focuses on the experiences and perceptions of staff within one school context. Given the ever-evolving debate around teacher professionalism (Whitty, 2008), this study adheres to a need to increase teacher engagement in, and with, research, and should therefore be considered as practitioner based in nature (see Burton and Bartlett (2004) for further discussions regarding the limits and advantages of practitioner research).

Approaching the study with a somewhat relativist perception of reality (involving a search for meaning rather than truth), where knowledge is conceptual and in keeping with the constructivist research paradigm (Killam, 2013), a set of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were conducted. Given the social and experiential focus of this qualitative research, where one cannot address the question through observations, such a method is befitting of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Design and Methodology

Acknowledging the first author's closeness to the school, the fact that he line manages some of the supervisees, and in attempting to avoid the possibility of 'biased' responses and ethical concerns (Kvale, 1996; Mertens, 2010), one-to-one interviews were conducted by two independent research assistants acting on our behalf.

Group Composition and Sampling

Further to the discussions held during the inset day, the staff at school M were given information, via posters and emails, as to how the groups would run. They were invited to sign up for the groups on a voluntary basis, and, unbeknownst to them, were allocated to their group in order of take up. Save for two replacement members (one on account of a person leaving the school, and one on long-term compassionate leave), the supervisees have

remained in the same three groups of five or six members. Thirty-seven members of frontline staff are employed at school M, and the groups are made up of staff that represent a range of roles. At the research approach stage, 17 staff members made up the population of the groups: three males and fourteen females. Members of the senior management team were not invited to form part of any group, as recommended by Jackson (2008). At the time of the research, six group members were fully qualified teachers (three were full-time class teachers, two provided behaviour support to local mainstream schools, and one worked with individual pupils on a one-to-one basis; one of these teachers is newly qualified and the remainder are experienced). Ten group members were teaching assistants (TAs). Of these, six were allocated to individual classes, two were higher-level teaching assistants (HLTAs) with teaching commitments, one worked as part of the behaviour support team, and one provided special educational needs (SEN) support for individual pupils. The final member of staff was employed as an office manager.

All 17 members of the groups were invited, via formal letter, to participate in a 45-minute interview. To encourage transparency and to assist participants in preparing their thoughts for the interview, a set of interview questions were attached to all invitations (Hart and Bond, 1995). Fourteen group members agreed to participate in the research. Two participants were unavailable on the day of the interviews and so did not take part: thus a sample of 12 staff members were interviewed. The gender of participants reflected the make-up of the groups, with approximately nine-tenths (n=11) of the sample being female. The numbers of participants in each staff role was also reflective of the total population: (population/sample) teachers 35/44 per cent, TAs 59/44 per cent, administration staff 6/11 per cent. Those that did not participate included two full-time class teachers, one HLTA and two TAs. The supervisor of the groups was also interviewed. His input provides an alternative perspective on the groups' experiences and offers a form of triangulation in the data.

School M, located in South East England, caters for 86 SEMH pupils. Rated by the United Kingdom Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) as outstanding at its last four inspections, school M became an academy in September 2011. It is the parent school of an academy trust consisting of three separate schools.

Ethics

Permission to undertake this research was received by the University Research Ethics Committee. Beyond the importance of ensuring a degree of anonymity (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012), and issues such as honesty, carefulness and integrity (Singh, 2012), ethical measures required specific and careful consideration. This was especially so given the sensitive nature of the groups, their agreed confidentiality, and the first authors position within the school.

Participants were assured that comments given at interview may be used for publication, but at no stage would names be assigned to citations. In addition, it was stressed that the interviews were not an examination of the content of the supervision sessions, but rather an evaluation of the experience of attending the groups. The supervisees were made aware of the intention to interview the supervisor, and vice versa.

Interviews

Two researchers with experience in education and of interviewing (both have a Master's degrees in Special and Inclusive Education and work as learning support assistants in special schools) met with supervisees individually and undertook interviews over one day at school M. The interviewers aimed to develop an informal rapport with interviewees before posing any questions by discussing the nature of the participant's role and sharing understanding. Interviews were undertaken in a quiet room free from interruptions and the interviews ranged

in length from 25 to 40 minutes. The supervisor's interview lasted for just over an hour, and was conducted in relaxed conditions at his home.

Data Analysis

For the responses to remain anonymous, thus negating the issue of the first author's familiarity with the supervisees and his position in the school, the interviews were transcribed by a third-party transcription service, TranscribeMe (www.transcribeme.com). The decision to opt for a third-party transcription service allowed the participants a greater freedom of expression. All supervisee recordings were sent directly by the research assistants to the transcription service. Anonymised transcripts were returned and forwarded onto the authors within three working days.

Given the independence of the groups' supervisor, the first author conducted the interview with the supervisor himself. Interview transcripts were thematically analysed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Thematic analysis of the data was deemed the most suitable method of addressing the research question. The decision to employ this method was based on the view that the approach offers an accessible and flexible approach to analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Consideration was given to content analysis (see Krippendorff, 1980), but as Braun and Clarke point out, there is no one ideal theoretical framework or method for conducting qualitative research: 'What is important is that the […] methods match what the researcher wants to know' (2006, 80). NVivo was chosen over manual paper and pencil coding methods because it has the advantage of generating additional evidence-based insights that may be overlooked when text is analysed manually and it provides a 'greater capability to do more sophisticated comparisons' (Auld et al., 2007, p. 47).

All transcripts were read through once before coding started. A more detailed rereading of the transcripts led to the identification of sections pertinent to the research question which were annotated to reflect the content and meaning. These comments were then assigned codes. This was achieved by highlighting the text, colour coding it, and copying and pasting the sections into folders referred to, by NVivo, as nodes. Through this iterative process of reading the coded sections many times, and collapsing together conceptually similar views and points, several themes and sub-themes emerged. These were then clustered together into over-arching themes. Instead of simply searching for items that were raised in the literature, this process was inductive in nature and involved working up from the data and the codes emerged directly from the records. The thematic analysis did not aim to go beyond the meanings as outlined by participants to provide an interpretive analysis but rather aimed to relate to the research question in a descriptive way.

To enhance and check the thematic coding process the researcher asked research assistants to review and code sections of the text (see Yardley, 2009). They then met with the first author to review, compare and discuss the jointly coded sections of transcripts and the thematic framework and in particular the more prevalent sub-themes and themes, their meanings, and possible interpretation. Discussions around these activities included how coding is sometimes subjective, the role of inference in unpicking meaning, and the overlapping of some codes. For example, some items appeared explicit: 'the groups are confidential', whereas others required some inference to extract similar meaning: 'the groups are a safe space'. Ultimately, save for time spent discussing the minutiae of some codes, the researchers were largely consistent in their coding, especially that of the role of the supervisor. With these discussions in mind, the full body of codes was reread, reflected upon, and, where necessary, altered accordingly and enabled an enhanced and deeper analysis of the data.

Findings

The themes and sub-themes resulting from the thematic analysis are presented in Tables 1-4. There were four overarching themes which pertained to: the benefits of supervision, the difficulties of supervision, issues associated with maintaining effective supervision and themes associated with future supervision. Data in tables reflect a sense of how often the codes and themes were raised in the transcripts, and indicate how many individual supervisees referred to them. Such data should not be taken to merely imply that greater frequency identifies themes as being of greater or less importance.

Overall, the findings are positive in nature. The many references to benefits perceived to exist far outweigh any comments around difficulties raised during the interviews, both in terms of number but also substance (see Tables 1 and 2). Minor contrasts found within individual responses are of interest.

**********Insert Table 1 approx. here

The largest of the four overarching themes related to the benefits of group supervision (see Table 1). The benefits perceived to exist due to attending group supervision at school M were opportunities to share emotional experiences, the feeling of a range of therapeutic effects, and the development of professional practice. Sub-themes within these hinted at an increased sense of staff camaraderie through supporting colleagues, an offloading of pressures that led to the relieving of stress, and a pooling of knowledge and understanding that validate the supervisees' experiences in the workplace (see Table 1).

A recurrent benefit perceived to exist amongst the supervisees was that of how supervision improved the relationships between colleagues attending the same groups. Coded

as 'camaraderie through supporting colleagues', all of the supervisees made comments regarding this point.

> Supervisee C: "*I feel it's definitely strengthened my relationship with members of staff in my group. I think it's made our relationships stronger. You look out for those people that are in your group. It makes a special bond*".

Despite the agreed acknowledgment that working in a SEMH school can be a stressful and sometimes negative experience, all supervisees felt supervision had a positive impact in allowing them to offload these pressures, alleviate stress and counter strained staff relations (see Table 1).

> Supervisee B: *"Personally, it* [supervision] *helps me cope with the stress emotionally. It helps you to clear your mind, think a little bit more positively, and sometimes then go back and think, 'Right, that's all gone. I've cleared that. I've spoken about that, so now I can almost start afresh'"*.

Similar comments indicated the staff felt re-energised and better equipped to conduct their duties. The perception was that supervision allows them to develop their professional practice and have a positive impact on pupils (see Table 1).

> Supervisee G: *"I had a child protection case a week ago, and it was on a Friday, and the Monday was supervision, so I spoke about it. I found it really hard to come in that day knowing what had happened. So I offloaded it all in here, and it meant that when I went into class I was there for the child, ready to have a positive impact"*.

> Supervisee F: *"It's good, because there's always people that will have been here longer than other people, so they've seen so much more. Like, "Oh yeah, I remember when this happened," so I just find I'm a sponge in some of the sessions where I'm going, "This is great, like I have all these tools now that I can go out and I just want to try them."*

Although most participants appreciated the offloading of pressures, and in doing so addressed the concept of projective identification, the opportunity to reflect on their practice

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was not lost on them as a benefit (see Table 1). Seven participants provided specific examples where this was the case.

> Supervisee K: "*I try and reflect back and think, "Is this happening because of what I'm doing or what I'm feeling?" Or, 'Am I seeing this situation as it is? Am I seeing the child and the difficulties they're having, or am I reflecting something onto the child, or am I taking on board what the child is* [feeling]*?' It's helped me try to look at those kind of relationships*".

A further benefit perceived to exist is that working together in groups allowed the participants valuable opportunities to pool their expertise. They were able to offer one another support and discuss coping strategies (see Table 1). Additional benefits were perceived as supervision's ability to validate and empathise with the pressures facing fellow members of staff. Supervision allows them to share their vulnerabilities, take heart from the fact that they share these experiences, and gain a greater understanding of their colleagues (see Table 1).

> *Supervisee A: "It's been good. It's understanding other people's motivations, understanding other people's practice, understanding other people's vulnerability".*

The fact that supervision at school M involves colleagues working together in groups was also seen to be beneficial (Table 1).

> Supervisee K: "*When you're trying to change people's trust levels, people's views of others, trying to ensure that we're trying not to judge people, the way to do that is to do it in a group, so you're aided by the people's thoughts and feelings*".

> Supervisor: "*People in the groups might be less toxic around the institution* […]. *They carry on with their normal friendships, so they have the experience that it's possible to do all of that with people who are not necessarily your best mate. And maybe that translates away from the group in an ability to work with other people without having to be friends with them*".

**********Insert Table 2 approx. here

When considering the relevant difficulties in providing and maintaining group supervision two themes emerged: in-session and practical challenges (see Table 2). Within these, the sub-themes of a lack of supervisee engagement and a feeling that the groups do not meet frequently enough are most prominent. A rereading of comments around the first of these items suggested this was not so much of a recurring difficulty, more an obstacle that was overcome. Indeed, the supervisor himself documented how this was achieved. In doing so, he also provided evidence of his consideration of contracting issues and his skill in chairing the sessions effectively.

Supervisee C: "*If one of us isn't talking much, the supervisor will direct questions at them to bring them in. He makes sure that everyone's had a chance to say something*".

Supervisor: "*I start by explaining what I think the purpose of the group is, that it's not a therapy group. I'll make a point about the importance of punctuality, that I will be responsible for starting and finishing us on time. I'm always taking the temperature and trying to hear where the anxieties are, where is the energy in the group? Who's busting to say stuff, who's keeping really quiet, and to what extent do I need to intervene and draw people out? Those are very individual. I have to make sure that people don't feel picked on or exposed. I might deliberately ask them a question just to make sure that they have contributed, really for themselves because I think a lot of people feel happier knowing that they've contributed something rather than having just sat and listened*".

Although four supervisees suggested the confidential nature of the group discussions fail to influence school decision making (see Table 2), amongst them was one who also offered evidence suggesting this was not the case. Supervisee I described how supervision had empowered her to request and secure a change in working arrangements. Having noted she previously felt uncomfortable raising an issue with the headteacher, she went on to explain:

"*I used to work with a girl. I loved that and, well then I got moved, and then I got moved again. I just felt really deflated. I was miserable at home and that ain't like me. And I felt*

I was taking it out on my kids, I'd never been like that as a Mum, and I thought, 'No, this has got to change'. So I did it. I went upstairs [to speak with the headteacher], *and she granted me my wish. They* [the group] *gave me the confidence to speak out".*

Similar items, coded as 'Discuss coping strategies' (see Table 1), suggested group supervision at school M may indeed be influencing decision making, albeit indirectly.

**********Insert Table 3 approx. here

The qualities of the supervisor showed itself to be an important theme when considering how to maintain effective supervision (see Table 3). The principal sub-theme suggested an effective and skilled supervisor is a necessity. Although somewhat obvious, the wealth and depth of comments around this item suggest it is deserving of greater importance and consideration.

> Supervisee L: *"[He's] brilliant. It amazes me how we can go for weeks sometimes, if there's been a holiday, and yet he'll remember something really small that you've said and then bring it back. It feels like he really is listening and taking stuff on board".*

Eleven of the participants were of the view that an external, independent supervisor was of a benefit to the process (see Table 3). Not only did some feel this allowed them to be more honest in their contributions to the sessions, the sense of detachment from the school was an advantage.

> Supervisee K: *"From a psychological perspective, if we dump it all onto him, he metaphorically takes it away and then he can process that in his own supervision. I think if it was done from anyone in-house, the chances are it would be done by somebody who would be in management. I certainly feel I couldn't talk openly about issues. I think it's a massive benefit".*

When considering future supervision and group maintenance, a theme of engagement with supervision saw positive recommendations to anyone considering entering into

supervision given by all interviewees (see Table 4). All suggested they would continue to attend supervision and displayed a desire that the groups should continue. The majority were of the opinion that the frequency of sessions should increase (see Table 2).

Supervisee A: "*It's like having a massage, you know what I mean? It makes you feel that you can function a bit more*".

Supervisee D: "*I'm probably getting more rewards from it than what I might have thought*".

**********Insert Table 4 approx. here

Discussion

This research aimed to examine the perceived benefits and difficulties in introducing and sustaining supervision groups for staff working in this SEMH special school. Participants spoke at length about their experiences and views of these groups and how these related to their ongoing work life with pupils and others staff in this school. Perhaps the most apparent and surprising benefit identified was the transformation in staff relationships. Although this is touched on by Hawkins and Shohet (2012), this point is rather overlooked in much of the literature, yet in this research comments around an increased sense of camaraderie through supporting colleagues outnumbered any other sub-theme. It would appear that being part of a supervision group provides the participants with a valuable support network that they can call on in times of both personal and professional need. Given these two needs are very much entwined, this sense of togetherness amongst staff should not be underplayed. As eight supervisees felt supervision can counter strained staff relations, any means of improving interactions between colleagues would appear valuable.

Given the increased feeling of collegiality amongst the participants, it would be worthwhile to ascertain whether this sense of unity impacts positively on staff retention

(Bingham, 2013). As all 12 participants indicated a clear desire to continue attending the groups it would have been useful to include a question regarding this matter within the interview schedule. That said, the opposite may also be true. Had the supervision groups proved unsuccessful, staff morale and attendance might deteriorate. As such, posing questions regarding supervision's ability to develop professional identity and improve job satisfaction might also have proved beneficial.

The findings are reassuring when compared with Rothi et al.'s (2010) research around the issue of stress. All interviewees provided evidence supporting the belief that working with SEMH pupils is highly challenging and an often negative experience. However, they felt supervision to be providing them with a regular means of addressing these issues. The importance here is the impact this may be having on pupils. Given that teachers may experience negative emotions towards their pupils (Jackson, 2002), this supports the belief that supervision allows its participants to be more effective in helping others (Hess, 1980).

The offloading of pressures through reflecting upon practice, and, to a small degree, the recognition of absorbing the feelings of others through projective identification, not only correspond with the literature (Carroll, 2007; Hawkins and Shohet, 1989, 2012), but also appear to be an important benefit of attending the groups. In recognising the pressures facing staff working with SEMH pupils, providing such employees with effective group supervision seems to be a valuable exercise. The fact that some supervisees report that supervision enables them to feel more resilient to support pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour is of obvious importance to both the education and physical and psychological well-being of such pupils.

The perceived belief that the grouping of staff was also of benefit deserves closer examination. Supervisee K's comment around this mirrors Abels' (1977) thoughts of how this arrangement is more natural and conducive to change. Being able to provide practical and emotional support from a range of perspectives not only appears to enhance the practice of

those receiving it. The opportunity to reflect upon the day-to-day events in such a pressured environment, knowing one's responses to them are informed by the experiences and thoughts of others, appears to resonate with the literature (Hawkins and Shohet, 1989; Wenger, 1998). Being given the time and space to share such professional knowledge within supervision may ensure this practice is embedded within the fabric of the school.

The suggestion that some members of staff may feel reluctant to seek out the support of others for fear of showing their vulnerabilities (Hawkins and Shohet, 1989), appears to be countered by the camaraderie experienced and the group structure provided by supervision groups. Moreover, the opportunity to discuss vulnerabilities and shortcomings is seen as beneficial, with some supervisees' comments suggesting they are now better placed to understand the motives and frailties of their colleagues, as they themselves may have experienced the same emotions. An appreciation of the opportunity to explore, empathise with and validate these feelings, within a secure and confidential environment, may be central to the development of camaraderie and feelings of unity in the workplace.

The range and nature of the benefits suggested by the participants, and their unanimously positive recommendations, advocate a need to provide group supervision for staff working in SEMH schools, and possibly further afield. At the least, the shared nature, structure and ethos of the other settings within school M's academy trust suggests that extending opportunities for group supervision to these schools would be justified.

The wealth of supervisee comments that a skilled supervisor independent of the organisation was of pivotal importance to the process adds weight to the belief that an experienced facilitator is a must for group supervision to prove beneficial (Hanko, 1999; Hawkins and Smith, 2006). This is not something that has been explicitly recognised in the literature which explores the need to secure an external, independent supervisor to oversee the sessions (Conyne, 1996; Hawkins and Shohet 1989). This may well be as a result of the

individuality of organisations and the different uses of group supervision in different contexts. Nonetheless, with reference to supporting staff in a stressful work environment an experienced and independent supervisor may be a necessity to get the best results and ensure a positive, productive, and therapeutic experience.

One area where an effective supervisor may be important is in relation to concerns that groups can become unnecessarily focused on co-rumination (Robert and Rose, 2010) Rather than allowing an ethos of negativity or despondency due to repeatedly discussing anxieties or problems many times over, a skilled supervisor might steer and direct a group towards the benefits of revisiting a still unresolved issue, to reframe it, offer a different perspective an /or facilitate a focused solution. Although half of the participants referred to an infrequency of sessions (fortnightly) as a drawback (this speaks volumes about their appreciation of the groups) this relative infrequency of sessions might also prevent the negative effects of co-rumination from taking hold.

Possibly because of the supervisor's understanding of group dynamics, the supervisees felt they had an opportunity to be heard in the groups. Had this not been the case, their lack of engagement in the sessions would have been an issue, and the groups might not have continued to meet. The fact that the staff continue to attend the sessions, and in doing so maintain the groups themselves, confirms the need to ensure all participants contribute to the discussions (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Proctor, 2008). Moreover, it should be stressed that the participants' comments on this issue were more acknowledgements of the need to ensure all felt included, rather than personal experiences of not being able to contribute to the group discussions.

An interesting theme raised by one supervisee but not highlighted in previous literature is that of new members joining established groups. Some supervisees appeared very protective of their group. This suggests more consideration should be given to agreeing when

it is appropriate for new members to join, and the means by which they are introduced. The camaraderie within groups could make it difficult for a new member to be accepted which might lead to feelings of alienation or that they are outside of a clique. There also exists a threat that a new member to any group might lead others to withdraw from discussions until establishing trust for the new supervisee. Any new member to the group will cause a disturbance to the group dynamics. Nevertheless, replenishing membership is important and will ensure the groups continue to exist. The responsibility for agreeing new members, the stages at which this is appropriate, and an evaluation of how this may benefit or hinder a group seem important items to address at the contracting stage of the venture or even once a group is established as part of a review. Furthermore, although Jackson (2008) recommended not including senior leadership within the groups, the literature fails to examine the dilemmas that would occur were an existing group member promoted into such a position. Being aware of privileged or sensitive information about an individual may be problematic and a senior leader's presence in a group may hamper those involved making contributions to the discussions. Such a situation could be avoided if addressed in the form of contract.

Participants highlighted the value that supervision groups had on their functioning within the work context and their practice. Nevertheless, there were relatively few explicit reflections from participants as to how the groups *have* influenced working practice and professional learning. This might have been because the focus of the groups was rather more on enhancing working relationships and supporting staff in the context of a stressful working environment. Similarly, the emphasis of the research was rather more on the perceptions and feelings that participants had in relation to the groups than their specific role in enhancing or developing practice. A more systematic focus on how groups influence professional reflection and practice would be useful to pursue in future research studies.

Supervisee experiences were not all positive and a few supervisees expressed a frustration that, due to their confidential nature, what was said within the groups often failed to transmit into positive changes in policy and practice. Not only does this address the belief that the supervisor should not be thought to hold all the answers (Jackson, 2008), but the need to agree fully any group's terms of reference prior to commencement (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012) also rings true. de Hann (2012) has suggested that a supervisor could feedback common patterns arising from group discussions, however this may not be appropriate as the supervisor would become a quasi-parent to the groups if acting on their behalf. This might also undermine trust and collegiality within the groups. A better alternative might be for a nominated spokesperson for each group be tasked with providing the headteacher with general, anonymised feedback that does not compromise group confidentiality. This would then enable a feedback mechanism whilst also maintaining the independence of the facilitator and the trust within the group.

When considering how best to maintain the groups, the supervisor's thoughts highlight the need for senior management teams to see the worth of supervision groups and a willingness to allocate resources in support of them. Not only does this stance further the need to provide evidence of the groups' progress via evaluations, but it may well develop a greater sense of trust between the two levels in the organisation, and address any potential for threatening misuse or subversion (Jackson, 2008).

On establishing an audit and evaluation of supervision, it is through the opportunity of this research project rather than any organisational design that such an exercise has taken place at school M. Although these findings were shared with the headteacher, no formal means of reviewing the groups was agreed before they were established. Considering both Proctor (2008) and Hawkins and Shohet (2012) advocated ongoing reviews as a means of taking into account changes in group dynamics, school M is fortunate that the findings

suggest such an oversight has not been an issue. Agreeing a regular means of reviewing the supervision groups should therefore be integral to the maintenance of the groups. Such a step would allow the groups to assess how they have developed over time, and examine whether they continue to sustain useful reflection. How this is to be achieved in future, however, requires careful consideration.

Limitations and Possible Future Research

Through this study we aimed to achieve a rich and credible understanding of staff experiences and views on the benefits and shortcomings of group supervision in this school context. Nevertheless, there are a number of shortcomings in this research. The main limitation of this study is its failure to provide a voice to those members of staff who do not participate in group supervision at school M. Gathering a wider range of viewpoints would provide a greater degree of validity, offered an alternative perspective and a more rounded assessment of the value of supervision in supporting practice, collegiality and reducing stress and anxiety within the setting. Doing so might also have gone some way to evaluating whether those not involved feel left out or at least less central to the aims of the organisation.

In hindsight, establishing a baseline of evidence from the outset of the groups, as proposed by Bubb and Earley (2009), may have enabled a more robust and nuanced evaluation, and provided comparative data on which to judge the effectiveness of the initiative. Agreeing this with supervisees from the start may have also addressed the need to make explicit the intended outcomes of group supervision for participants and potentially for pupils at school M.

A measure of the impact the supervision groups are having on the school as a whole would be of use and add value to the study. Given that education is a school's main purpose, future studies would do well to provide evidence that supervision impacts positively on

professional practice and school values, especially if an increased uptake of supervision is to be seen and sustained. Participant J even went so far as to suggest the initiative may be segregating those who do attend supervision from those who do not, as seen in Hanko (1995). Further research into this area would be valuable.

To suggest the findings from this study could be generalizable would be an overstatement. They arose in a specific school context under the supervision of just one experienced supervisor. Nevertheless, they highlight what can be achieved and, thus, the findings may be transferable and of relevance to other work settings high in stress, that involve supporting and helping individuals with challenging needs. Given that group supervision in schools has been influenced by its use elsewhere, it is also quite possible that it may be of benefit to similar caring organisations, such as residential care homes for vulnerable children and adults, pupil referral units and other contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Supervised staff at school M feel group supervision provides them with invaluable opportunities to strengthen working relationships with their colleagues, and process and manage the stresses involved in working with SEMH pupils. It allows them to reflect on their practice in a meaningful manner, within a confidential forum that facilitates the sharing and validating of their experiences. To achieve this and overcome any difficulties, they indicate this must be underpinned by an effective and external supervisor, independent of the school.

The positive recommendations given by all interviewees to anyone considering entering into supervision, and their wish that the groups should continue, echo the many benefits seen to exist in the literature, and reinforce the belief that the benefits overshadow any difficulties (de Hann, 2012; Proctor, 2008).

The supervisees provide evidence of how group supervision has had a notable, positive impact in improving their interactions with colleagues. A more direct measure of their impact on pupils would be of considerable worth. Indeed, the impact these groups are having on the wider school community remains unexamined. Therefore, further research into this aspect of group supervision would be beneficial. Canvassing the views of those who do not receive supervision may provide evidence of it having a wider reaching effect. Be it in the form of traditional research methods, or those that were more experimental in nature, gauging how supervision sits within the fabric of the school would go some way to justifying its use in education. For example, a mixed method study involving analysis of the data from critical incidents at school M, coupled with field observations of such events, might reveal differences in the practice of those staff who do, and who do not, receive supervision.

The benefits fostered within the groups are providing the right conditions in which to improve staff morale, increase teacher self-efficacy, and enhance the overall effectiveness of the school. These are crucial when seen against the challenging and sometimes negative environment of a SEMH special school.

It is already the case that visiting therapists working in SEMH schools receive their own form of supervision within their clinical practice. Extending this to the staff who work with the same pupils on a daily basis seems not only sensible, but advisable. This study suggests group supervision at school M should continue to be offered to its staff, and its use in schools, especially those which cater for SEMH pupils, would be of benefit to a wide range of employees. Given that teacher wellbeing is central to improving pupil outcomes, schools that invest in the motivation, development and welfare of their staff are likely to have a greater impact on teaching and learning and potentially retention of staff. Considering the often-fractured nature of SEMH pupils' paths through education, this form of support would appear ideally suited to staff working with such pupils.

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Table 1. Benefits.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Referenced by number of supervisees interviewed	Number of references
Shared emotional experiences	Camaraderie through supporting colleagues	12	64
	Opportunities to talk with different colleagues	11	31
	Gaining an understanding of others	11	22
	Working together in groups	11	22
	Validate and empathising with experiences	11	21
	Countering of strained staff relations	8	15
	Non-judgemental	5	7
Therapeutic effects	Opportunity to offload/alleviate stress	12	52
	Explores projective identification	5	9
	Beneficial on a personal level	5	8
	Can show vulnerabilities	5	6
Develop professional practice	Discuss coping strategies	11	20
	Opportunity to reflect on practice	7	14
	Positive impact on pupils	9	12

Table 2. Difficulties.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Referenced by number of supervisees interviewed	Number of references
In-session challenges	Lack of supervisee engagement	6	10
	Does not influence decision making	4	5
Practical challenges	Not frequent enough	6	9
	Introducing new group members	1	2

Table 3. Maintaining Effective Group Supervision.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Referenced by number of supervisees interviewed	Number of references
Qualities of the supervisor	Effective supervisor	11	42
	External, independent supervisor	11	17

Table 4. Future Supervision.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Referenced by number of supervisees interviewed	Number of references
Engagement	Positive recommendation	12	28
	Want it to continue	10	16
	Will continue to attend	12	15
	Should be compulsory	2	2