

**EXPLORING HOW PROFESSIONAL  
SUPERVISION CAN STRENGTHEN THE  
LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF PRINCIPALS IN  
PRIMARY SCHOOLS.**

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“An oasis or a fireside, a place where a weary traveller can take some respite and nourishment to continue on his or her professional journey.” (Julie Hewson)

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## **Introduction**

This sabbatical was undertaken in Term 2, 2011. In preparation for this study I attended a training course for supervisors, facilitated by Margaret Morrell. During the term I interviewed three principals in Victoria, Australia and nine in Christchurch and mid-Canterbury. There were four males and eight females involved in the study. I also engaged in a literature research reading a number of articles on the internet and other professional literature on professional supervision.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Executive Summary**

New Zealand was the first and perhaps the sole country in the world to move to full scale decentralisation of educational provision across all sectors. The advent of self-management in New Zealand required a new type of leader, and new ways of developing the skills he or she would need. More specifically, the country needed educational leaders who could build capability and commitment, build strong relationships and partnerships, focus on learning, understanding the change process and see the importance of finding new approaches to doing and being. As you will read in this inquiry, the use of professional supervision has a dramatic effect on enabling principals to fulfil their roles more effectively. Some of the many benefits for our educational leaders include improved communication and decision making and the opportunity to reflect critically on their practice. Those individuals who use the particular process of professional support feel more energised, empowered, focussed and confident in their ability.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this inquiry was to investigate ways in which primary school principals utilise Professional Supervision to support them in their role as educational leaders.

## Rationale and Background Information

### Defining Professional Supervision

The Ministry of Education provided this working definition for the purposes of a research project into Professional Supervision and School Principals undertaken by David Eddy and Carol Cardno in 2008.

“Professional Supervision is a particular process of support that is used to help individuals review, reflect upon and resolve the issues or problems that they face in carrying out their work. It has a focus on pastoral care and emotional support of the individual, as well as on support for professional learning. It involves a trusting relationship with another person, or sometimes a small group. Confidentiality is central to the discussion associated with the support. Its outcomes are personal support, growth and on the job learning as a professional”. (Eddy & Cardno)

In books written primarily for the health and social services sectors, the terms supervision, clinical supervision and professional supervision share the same meaning. These all refer to the “overseeing” of the work of a practitioner in a professional context. It may be carried out for any of the following three purposes according to Kadushin.

**Administrative**, also known as normative supervision is concerned with the implementation of policies and procedures, clarification of role, documentation requirements, time management, appraisal etc.

**Educational** or Formative Supervision involves developing professional knowledge and skills, goal setting, reflection, challenging or extending ideas.

**Supportive** or Restorative Supervision focuses on the supervisee’s emotional needs and includes debriefing, offloading, reassurance, encouragement, celebrating success, managing stress and maintaining a safe environment.

There is a distinction between supervision which is focussed on the role of leading and that which is concerned primarily with the individual.

In 1993 the Department of Health defined supervision as “a formal process of professional support and learning which enables practitioners to develop knowledge and competence.....and should be seen as a means for encouraging self-assessment and analytic and reflective skills”.

Brown and Bourne state that “the aim is to enable the supervisee to carry out their work...as effectively as possible”.

Bond and Holland state that “clinical supervision is regular, protected time for facilitated, in-depth reflection on clinical practice.”

It has also been defined as a process in which the supervisor enables guides and facilitates the individual in meeting organisational, professional and personal objectives. There are strong arguments for professional supervision to be at the centre of professional learning for principals. Potentially it is of great value. Like other professions it can strengthen capability and enhance leadership skills.

Julie Hewson describes professional supervision as “an oasis or a fireside, a place where a weary traveller can take some respite and nourishment to continue on his or her professional journey.”

## **Coaching and Mentoring**

In my discussions with principals in Victoria and Canterbury, a few mentioned that as beginning principals they had interacted with people who served as ‘coaches’ or ‘mentors’ to support them in their new roles. These could be viewed as forms of professional supervision depending on the nature and purpose of the meetings and the relationship between the two participants.

There is convincing empirical evidence of the value of coaching in educational leadership. The world’s top school systems are using coaching to build leadership capacity, and in turn, high performing principals spend time coaching other teachers all to the purpose of improving student outcomes. Coaching is now widely accepted as a key element of effective leadership. Education leaders attest to its impact on professional growth and performance. The ways in which the benefits of individual coaching be extended, thus contributing to whole school and system improvement was explored at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Leadership Coaching Conference for Educators held in Melbourne in June this year.

Jan Robertson from the University of Waikato conducted an action research study over a two year period involving twelve New Zealand primary principals. Guiding the research study were the questions, “Do partnerships assist in the development of primary school principals? If so, in what ways?”

All of the twelve principals testified that their participation in a “partnerships” assisted in their professional development. Working in each other’s schools enabled these principals to reflect critically on their leadership practices. This opportunity to have time to practise self-assessment is a crucial factor in the professional supervision experience.

One principal I interviewed in Australia attested to the effectiveness of “The Coaching for Experienced Principals” programme. This was developed for the Victorian Department of Education and Training by the APC (Australian Principals Centre) at the Australian Council for Educational Research. The reason for this initiative was based on the following information.

Given the length of time many principals will lead their school and the professional isolation many experience, it is critical that their learning and development needs are addressed in ways that will give them the tools for a more reflective leadership style which can respond to changing school priorities.

Coaching, especially if it is approached with an empowering, rather than a directive focus, is an ideal mode for working with experienced leaders. Unlike some professional learning that needs to be translated to fit the unique web of relationships and circumstances of each school, coaching is undertaken within that context and is an ideal vehicle for principals to “rethink their leadership” with the help of a skilled facilitator.

This programme was successful because it was designed around a coaching approach that was collaborative and developmental rather than interventionist. It fostered the development of

transformational leaders and a focus on reflection as a tool to bring about leadership and improvement.

A key factor in the overwhelming positive response to this programme is linked to the principals' confidence about the confidentiality of the relationship with his or her coach. Principals are rarely able to reveal their vulnerability as leaders and really appreciated the fact that their coach's only motivation was to help them to become more effective in their role. One principal reported that it was reaffirming and almost indulgent to have time to reflect, discuss, plan and be supported to do so. Another stated that this experience made her more confident in her own abilities and it has re-energised her performance.

Coaching for experienced principals is a relatively new concept. Typically coaching is viewed as something that is undertaken by business executives or sports people. While there are many examples in literature that focus on coaching or mentoring support for new school leaders, particularly in their first year, there has been much less interest in New Zealand in coaching for more experienced leaders.

David Eddy and Carol Cardno's research in 2008 showed that two thirds of primary and secondary school principals in New Zealand have no current or recent experience of professional supervision of any type, other than mentoring or coaching for a few. Those who did participate in professional supervision indicated that the activity was self-initiated with a very small number having a professional supervision experience with a professional counsellor or psychotherapist.

## **Action Research**

During the course of my study, I interviewed three Australian primary principals and eight new Zealanders. There were eight females and three males. I have written their responses to the questions exactly as they were told to me during the interviews.

## **Interview Questions**

1. How can you, as a primary principal, develop knowledge and competence in a safe environment where you will be allowed the opportunities to practise self-assessment? Do your existing practices include any form of professional supervision, coaching, mentoring, use of a critical friend or buddy, counselling etc.?
2. Do you have regular protected time for facilitated in depth reflection of your professional practice?  
How?  
When?  
Where?  
Who is responsible for the agenda?
3. Can you see ways in which extending this existing support could benefit you in fulfilling your role as the educational leader of your school?  
If Professional Supervision was offered to you, which model would best suit your needs?

## Question 1

- A. She made use of her deputy principal a lot. She thought this worked well as he often challenged decisions which meant that she had to justify the reasons she had chosen a particular course of action. She visits a counsellor regularly to assist her in dealing with problems in her personal life. This isn't school related. Another staff member acts as her critical friend.
- B. In her last position she had a critical friend who shadowed her once every month. She acted as her 'ears' and would critique her presentations, staff meetings etc. She then gave feedback on the principal's relationships with staff and the way she communicated her goals to the school community. The Catholic Education Office in Melbourne provided five free sessions for principals with a professional supervisor through the Australian Quality Teaching scholarship. Currently her school is in the Peninsula Zone which has twenty schools meeting once every month. There are groups within this that can be tapped into for a particular purpose. Her school is one of a cluster of four schools who meet each term. These groups provided great inspiration and mental support.
- C. This principal is part of a cluster of three schools who meet once per fortnight. They are forming a group together called 'Schools as Core Social Centres'. He also belongs to a principals' network who meet every month. This is a very supportive group who act as critical friends and there is a great feeling of trust amongst them. Wide ranging issues are discussed in a very safe environment.
- D. This principal mainly used her appraiser to assist her in developing her professional knowledge. She sets goals at the beginning of each year and develops an action plan which is her focus for school-wide improvement. She works alone in developing suitable professional development for her staff in order to achieve these goals. This person also sources and attends relevant courses to enable her to reach her goals. Apart from her appraiser whose visits between two and four times during the year, she consults with two other colleagues who face similar challenges in their schools, e.g. immigration issues. The deputy principal is an excellent listener who provides the principal with valuable feedback.
- E. Professional reading is done at home, as she doesn't have time at school. It is difficult to keep up current educational thinking this way but she admitted that when she was doing her master's in education papers she was able to find the time to be self-reflective. This principal stated that unless she was involved in academic study, the day to day business of running the school takes precedence.

She is part of the Catholic Principals' Professional Learning Communities (CPPLC), where the facilitator prepares and presents readings for the group. This is her only opportunity to do professional reading. She finds the group very safe and supportive. Usually she will call upon one of three close colleagues if a problem arises. These are informal occasions. Her appraiser is a good listener and reaffirms the work she is doing. She believes that she is very lucky to be in the Catholic system which provides excellent support. There is no competition between the schools. Without the support of the leadership adviser from the Catholic Education office and her colleagues, this principal said that she would not have survived in her role. She said that principalship was a very lonely job.

- F. The Catholic principals' learning group (CPPLC) is his main source of support. They meet once per term with a facilitator. He finds the discussions based on professional readings very helpful and feels that the environment is both supportive and confidential. He also seeks advice from other colleagues when particular issues arise. These people are chosen for their areas of expertise, e.g. legal staff relationships, property etc.
- G. This principal named her secretary as the person who provided her with support and fulfilled the role of her critical buddy. Her board of trustees chairperson is a valuable source of pastoral care for her. Emotional and professional knowledge needs are also met through regular meetings with two close colleagues. During these meetings the focus will be on a range of topics from staffing issues to compliance and curriculum matters. Expertise is shared and meetings organised for them to attend with other professionals if there is a need. This principal commented on the fact that she received a lot of support as a beginning principal but since the role involves continuous learning and up-skilling, there is an ongoing need for support. In matters of educational leadership her appraiser provides excellent feedback and encourages her to reflect on her current practice.

She has found the Catholic school system very supportive especially the principals' learning group every term. During these meetings, she is able to sit and chat with her colleagues about the challenges the principals' role brings as well as reflecting on practices. Additionally, this principal and four others meet with a priest who acts as their spiritual advisor. These meetings are held monthly.

- H. This principal sees a psychotherapist once per month. This experience has been life changing for him, because although it was self-initiated for personal reasons, he transfers the processes he has learned through these sessions to his management style which has changed dramatically as a result. This has had a positive impact on his ability to carry out his responsibilities as the educational leader of his school. He touches base with a friend five days per week for emotional support. A walking buddy he meets regularly fulfils the role of critical friend.

All three of these support people work outside the education sector. He has a spiritual advisor with whom he meets regularly on an informal basis. He recognises that apart from his participation in the principals' learning group, where he is exposed to professional readings and participates in discussions on educational matters, he feels that he is not addressing his needs as an educational leader. He meets a colleague weekly where they discuss current school issues.

- I. This principal receives regular professional supervision for the purposes of reflective practice, leadership development, emotional support, unloading and professional development on a current educational focus. She did not realise how much she needed professional supervision until she began the practice in 2010. Now, this principal looks forward to her sessions and regularly experiences "aha" moments, because she has given herself the time to think about current issues and reflect on them. Usually she says, principals tend to get bogged down in the minutiae of the job and rarely give themselves the necessary amount of time needed for reflection. She says her professional supervisor has been invaluable in strengthening her leadership role. The supervisor asks the right questions, leads her in developing different thought patterns and steers her towards exploring and selecting other options when dealing with issues.



The professional supervisor always finds the positives and provides valuable feedback. She is always affirming of the principal, acknowledging the processes she has used in dealing with challenges and often encourages her to reflect on her ideas. This principal feels very fortunate that she has this professional supervision and believes that because principals are on their own on a day to day basis, they should all receive the opportunity to have professional supervision. This principal acknowledges that the CPPLC sessions, facilitated by the leadership adviser from the Catholic Education Office provide excellent support. She enjoys the friendship of her colleague but, as she states, professional supervision is a completely different experience.

- J. This principal has a professional supervisor whom she finds invaluable, since she is detached from the staff and community. She appreciates her experience as a facilitator as she is current in her thinking and is well aware of topical issues facing principals. The supervisor is pragmatic and is able to advise on both management and curriculum matters. This principal is in a rural environment and utilises the MOE websites for information and professional readings. Because of the school's isolation, she makes an effort to attend two principals groups. The South Canterbury Catholic principals' learning group is very useful.
- K. This principal finds that the internet is a fantastic source for keeping up to date on leadership issues. She finds that she becomes inundated with opportunities to be involved in professional development initiatives and has begun to delegate many of these to members of her management team. She belongs to the Catholic principals' learning group which is structured around professional readings chosen by the facilitator. She has a professional supervisor whom she values for her ability to assist in creative problem solving, providing suggestions and affirming the work she is doing as principal. This principal finds it challenging to find the time and the headspace to critically reflect on her practice. She and her deputy principal meet weekly with the parish priest to reflect on all the positives that are happening within the school. Her deputy principal is a great sounding board.
- L. Although he had received very good support in the past from a former colleague who is now retired and by belonging to a principals' mentoring group which is now defunct, this principal receives limited support in his role as leader of his school. He relies in the Catholic Principals' Professional Learning Community for professional readings and opportunities for discussion. His involvement in the Curriculum Leadership Project and ICT cluster allow him to keep up with current teaching and learning practices. Although he is part of a local cluster group, he finds this ineffective. He has one colleague whom he trusts to "share" and "spill". It is a helpful relationship. Feedback from a recent appraisal was useful in helping him determine his goals.

## Question 2

- A. She blocks out meetings once or twice each week with an educational consultant working with the school. Other meetings with deputy principal and critical friend are organised when they are both free. They usually meet in the office, but sometimes go for coffee. The counselling takes place off-site. Both parties will set the agenda depending on the reason for the meeting.

- B. She met with her critical friend and professional supervisor every month. This principal set the times for the meeting and the agenda was set by both parties. Her professional supervisor sometimes provides her with a reading related to her current school goal. She currently sets aside protected time for professional reading for an hour and a half every week. During this time she reflects on her practice during the week reflecting on her ongoing goals.
- C. He attended the scheduled fortnightly and monthly meetings. The host school set the agenda for the meetings but there were opportunities in both cases to discuss other issues either formally or informally. On a personal level his wife is his confidante and he strives to practise daily meditation for 30 minutes.
- D. One and a half hours are set aside each week for the principal to meet with the deputy. This is held at school and is an opportunity for the principal to focus on current issues facing the school.
- E. Her only personal time is during the Catholic principals' learning group where she can relax and participate in a safe environment. There are no interruptions or feelings of pressure and she can be completely honest when discussing her experiences as a school leader.
- F. No, this principal does not have any regular protected time to reflect on his practice.
- G. No regular times are allotted.
- H. He and his principal colleague meet weekly taking turns at each other's schools otherwise he meets offsite in his own time.
- I. In 2010, she received professional supervision weekly. In 2011, it is fortnightly.
- J. She meets her professional supervisor regularly.
- K. She meets her professional supervisor once per month, her deputy principal weekly and the management team weekly. The weekly meetings which take place with the deputy and the priest occur offsite as do the meetings with her professional supervisor. She sets the agenda for professional supervision meetings. The agenda is shared amongst the participants at the other meetings and usually deals with what's on top.
- L. Apart from the professional learning group who meets once per term, the other meetings are informally organised without specific times or purposes.

### **Question 3**

- A. This principal was satisfied with the opportunities she had for advice and support.
- B. Both the use of a critical friend and a professional supervisor from the Catholic Education Office (Victoria) were choices that this principal would use again as she found both very effective.

- C. He said that there has been fantastic support for the school from the Catholic Education Office (Victoria). There is also excellent support for new principals in the form of a coach/mentor. The Principals' Induction Programme runs a professional development programme including the opportunity for principals to visit each other in their schools for a period of time. This principal did not feel the need for further support as he felt that he had colleagues he could trust. They were people doing the same job as him, so he felt that they understood his problems and were willing to share their expertise. He said there was a real generosity of time and spirit within both his cluster and network groups.
- D. This principal would appreciate the opportunity to have professional supervision once a term and more often if needed. She would love the chance to have one-on-one supervision in a confidential environment. She envisages having an experienced principal whom she trusts implicitly and who has credibility as an effective facilitator.
- E. This principal would ideally like to have set protected times for critical reflection. She thinks these sessions should be preplanned and without interruption. There should be training for both the supervisor and the supervisee and they should develop a model of the process together. The agenda should be planned so that optimum benefit would be gained from each session. The supervisor would be somebody this principal completely trusts. He/she would be very experienced in education and have outstanding skills in dealing with people. This principal would have to feel confident that the supervisor would have the necessary experience to provide an effective professional supervision experience.
- F. He believes that professional supervision would be a very beneficial experience and looks forward to being challenged in a one on one situation. He stated that principalship can be a very lonely experience. Trust would be a very important factor in his choice of supervisor, whom he believes should be an experienced principal. He would choose to have preplanned sessions twice each term and more often if necessary.
- G. This person has self-initiated the support she currently receives in response to her own educational and emotional needs. She is able to cater for her spiritual needs. She would find professional supervision very effective as a means of improving her own practice. She would ideally like to have monthly meetings, which are very well prepared. Her choice of supervisor would be well respected educationally. He/ she would have current knowledge and be a credible facilitator. Another benefit for this principal would be the expectation that she in turn would be able to use the professional supervision processes in her interactions with her own staff.
- H. He would have no hesitation in employing a professional supervisor to enable him to become a more effective principal. He would choose an experienced principal who was abreast of current educational trends. The supervisor would be somebody he could trust implicitly.
- I. The professional supervisor she uses is excellent because she is always well prepared. She is highly skilled at empowering the principal to make well thought out decisions. She is an excellent listener and this principal trusts her completely. She would be very happy to continue with this present model for the foreseeable future and believes that the opportunities for professional supervision would be very valuable for members of her management team. The model to be used was discussed at the first meeting between the supervisor and the

principal. The contract was signed by both parties. As she said, we expect our staff and student to practise self-reflection, so as leaders we should be modelling this ourselves.

- J. This principal values her professional supervision experience. In her opinion, a contract to define the purpose of supervision is necessary. The process must be carried out in a private space without interruption. The supervisor must be a practical, experienced leader with current educational leadership knowledge and confidentiality is crucial. She likes the fact that the sessions are preplanned and through critical reflection, outcomes are invariably reached. She would recommend having professional supervision twice per term.
- K. In his present role, this principal was of the view that a personal coach would enable him to strengthen his skills as a professional leader. He would self-select a person whom he could absolutely trust as a coach and would welcome some honest feedback and encouragement. He would want to establish a good relationship with the person and meet in an environment of absolute trust and confidentiality. He would value the chance to unload to a skilled listener, to be led into exploring different options in his thinking and for somebody to critique his ideas. This principal looked forward to the opportunity to have professional supervision for these purposes.

## **Findings**

The twelve principals I interviewed were very open and willing to share their experiences of the support they received. The term professional supervision was interpreted in different ways by the interviewees in Australia, so when I talked to my Canterbury colleagues, I introduced the definition as explained in the David Eddy and Carlo Cardno report. This clarified the process for the interviewees. Only three of the interviewees were involved in profession supervision according to this definition.

As you will have read from their responses above, they all agreed that it is the most empowering professional development they have received. Busy school principals can't always drop what they are doing to attend external professional development sessions but knowing that they have preplanned, structured supervision on a regular basis is reassuring. One off professional development sessions often have little value but with the professional process, the sessions are ongoing, providing principals with the strategies they need to become even better at what they are doing in order to strengthen their schools.

It is imperative that certain conditions are in place for professional supervision to bring about the desired benefits these three principals described. The supervisor must be a credible educator possessing the knowledge, experience and skills to empower the supervisees to bring about change in their thinking, to allow them to develop strategies to solve problems, to critically reflect on their actions, to achieve their goals, deepen their learning and produce the desired results.

The professional supervisor will be self-selected, a person who has the complete trust of the supervisee and is able to provide a safe, confidential environment. He/she would have the ability to provide positive feedback, to be encouraging and to affirm and support the supervisee. They must also give the supervisee time to focus on the issue being discussed allowing critical reflection to occur.

A contract outlining the structure and expectations of the sessions should be provided and signed by both parties. Keeping minutes of the meetings is also advised. Meetings need to be set in advance at regular intervals. These three principals agreed that meetings held either monthly or twice per term suited their needs. The purpose of the session with “what’s on top” issues being clarified should be stated clearly at the beginning of each session after the settling in process.

Four principals commented on the fact that as beginning principals they received a great deal of support but this level of support decreased as they became more experienced. Because the demands of educational leadership are constantly changing, professional supervision is crucial for these successful principals who indicated that they want to increase their effectiveness and achieve their peak potential.

There were a range of responses to the first question from the other nine principals who were interviewed. Seven people said that they developed knowledge and gained support from the Catholic Principals’ Professional Learning Community which is facilitated by the Leadership Adviser from the Catholic Education Office. They relied on this opportunity to discuss professional readings provided by the facilitator, to discuss current challenges in their schools and to catch up with their colleagues. This was the only time professional reading was carried out in several cases.

Three principals discussed school related issues with their deputy principals. Two principals received encouragement and personal support from their appraisers and the chairperson of the board of trustees. One principal used a very supportive secretary for unloading her problems. Seven said they had buddies and / or colleagues who acted as sounding boards.

Although they used the term ‘critical friend’ to describe their relationships in some instances, these people were actually supportive friends to these principals since critical reflection of the principal’s practice was not evident in these relationships. It appears that their connections to other colleagues were primarily for friendship and advice.

To help them deal with personal problems, two principals used counselling and psycho-therapy which has also enabled them to manage their professional roles more effectively.

## **Implications**

Professional Supervision will undoubtedly empower our educational leaders to become more effective leaders. Structured to meet the individual’s specific needs, these one on one sessions will provide principals with the skills and support to better manage their demanding roles. There will be a positive flow-on effect for all members of their school communities. Six of the nine Canterbury principals not receiving supervision expressed a strong desire to explore the possibilities of having professional supervision as their primary source of professional supervision.

As they admitted, they did not have a specific person or process to turn to for support when dealing with challenging issues. Their colleagues more often than not were grappling with serious issues of their own and although sympathetic, did not possess the knowledge and skills of a professional supervisor to deal with their issues. These principals felt that they needed feedback on the way they were operating which they didn’t often receive. Four of the principals I spoke with mentioned the loneliness of the position. It was often difficult for them to confide in other people to relieve the stress they regularly experienced.

It was obvious to the participants in this inquiry, that once members of the board of trustees understood the transformative effects of professional supervision, funding should be available for every primary school principal to receive professional supervision. If we are striving to be the best educational leaders we can be, then employing the practice of professional supervision is a crucial step towards realising this goal.

David Eddy reported that among those principals who had experienced professional supervision, nearly half indicated that the highest level of satisfaction was associated with their experience of mentoring and coaching. Asked about the relationship between principal appraisal and professional supervision, the majority view was that these are and should continue to be two different performance related experiences.

Principals believe that they (not the board of trustees) should be responsible for any professional supervision arrangements and that outcomes remain confidential between the supervisor and themselves. In their view, professional supervision should be conducted in response to on the job problems or issues a principal is experiencing in their school and context, and requires a high trust and confidential relationship. In relation to how professional supervision links to their leadership of learning and teaching, most participants in this study agreed that this link was more tangential than planned. They believed this leadership should be the focus of professional development.

## **Conclusions**

There are strong arguments for professional supervision to be at the centre of professional learning for principals. Potentially it is of great value. The process is widely used in other professions, notably in the health and social services sectors. As in these professions it can strengthen capability and enhance leadership skills. If our educational leaders participate in professional supervision, the proven benefits for themselves, their staff, community and students are invaluable.

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