

**“AN OASIS, VALET SERVICE, A LARGE MIRROR AND A
RETREAT.”** (Carroll, 2010)

An argument for professional supervision in the education sector.

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Introduction

Sabbaticals are welcome opportunities for principals to refresh and revitalise their professional lives. However it is contestable, condensed and a minimum of five years apart. Professional Supervision integrates restorative outcomes as well as fostering personal and professional growth as part of normal work and could be an alternative or additional model.

The New Zealand education landscape changed dramatically with the introduction of 'Tomorrow's Schools' in 1989. It heralded the introduction of self-management and governance at the local level, with expanded roles and responsibilities for school leaders and parents.

The argument on whether this has led to improved outcomes for children remains debateable but the impacts of the competing and often conflicting demands and expectations on school principals are in my experience without doubt.

The professional isolation of principals is real, well-documented and accepted. (Wylie, 2013) The support of principals in this new paradigm is sporadic, localised and without system frameworks or cohesion.

By reflecting on personal experience and with examination of some of the literature, a rationale, definition, purpose and framework for the provision of professional supervision has emerged.

A look back to look forward – Defining purpose, function and the place of supervision.

The history and evolution of professional supervision in other public services that have similar high pressure and accountability, gives some confidence that there is an opportunity for supervision to have a positive impact on educational leadership and student learning. The term 'professional supervision' is one that continues to evolve and be redefined. It remains particularly broad and an elusive concept for most school principals. Research undertaken for the Ministry of Education in 2008 found that many principals questioned the appropriateness of the term. It had “negative connotations of having an overseer”, and being checked-up on. (Eddy, Cardno & Chai, 2008, p. 6)

There is now a considerable body of literature that discusses the concept of supervision particularly in the health and social services. The existence of related terms such as clinical supervision, supportive supervision, administrative supervision, mentoring, coaching, preceptorship and counselling, do create confusion and even suspicion in the way they are employed. (Driscoll & O'Sullivan, 2007, Kadushin, 1992)

My introduction to professional supervision was consistent with this ambiguity and even suspicion. The Latin origins of the word 'super' means “over” and “videre” to watch or see, supports this hierarchical and managerial notion. It implies also a mutual relationship within a professional context. When my Board of Trustees Chairperson recommended supervision, my immediate thinking was, “What did I do wrong?”, “Isn't it counselling?”, and “I'm not stressed!” This exemplifies the

misinformation, misunderstanding and the uncertainty of the role and outcomes of supervision.

Defining professional supervision and earlier concepts are closely aligned to their respective purposes and functions. Supervisors in the 19th century oversaw volunteer social workers. Their primary responsibility was to check and ensure that the most deserved got the service. Forms of later supervision moved into broader practice and support akin to an apprenticeship. (Davys & Beddoe 2010, p12-13)

The blurred line distinguishing supervision from counselling emanated from the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis in the 20th century. (Davys & Beddoe 2010, Carroll, 2007) The major function of supervision was to remedy failure, or to mitigate error. It was often deemed for psychological and personal reasons. The relationship was power loaded and not surprisingly resisted by experienced practitioners. The origins may well lie here for misunderstanding, for a stereotyping of supervision and the implication of weakness. (Eddy et al, 2008, Driscoll & O'Sullivan, 2007)

This resonated with my own initial experience. Supervision was undertaken with a registered counsellor and not with a peer who had contextual credibility. Although a tension, this is in my view, not an encumbrance for effective and powerful professional learning. The neutral position and objectivity of the supervisor are arguably helpful. The outcomes are more often humanistic and relational rather than superficially work specific. As Davys and Beddoe (2008) successfully argue, "It is indeed the goals which distinguish supervision from therapy/counselling."(p.30) The intent of supervision is to develop professionally, however that may involve personal growth as a means to that end. This is further expanded by Carroll, (2008). "Supervision no longer just looks inwards to help supervisees do their work better,

but also helps them look outwards to the systems which they are part of, and in which they work.” (p.2)

With the change described by Davys and Beddoe, (2008), during the 1970’s, supervision became increasingly focussed on the work of the supervisee. This distinction is important in defining supervision and its potential role and benefit in the education sector. It highlights the primary purpose for supportive supervision underpinned by critical reflection, self-awareness, dialogue and application of learning to the workplace. This description and function for supervision is supported by Carroll (2008), Webber-Dreaden (1999) and Shohet (2011) and aligns with modern educational leadership thinking and emerging practice.

A persistent theme in the literature is the confusion that exists around defining clinical supervision. It can be fairly argued that this originates from the prevailing political and ideological beliefs of the time. Supervision practice evolved but the label remained.

During the 1980’s and 90’s, a neoliberal paradigm existed with a particular focus and concern on accountability. There was greater scrutiny of public service and a dominating corporate model that expected efficiency, outputs and high standards of public safety. This saw clinical supervision as more administrative with an emphasis on performance management and review. In the education setting, this saw high stakes appraisal, reporting, and increased school compliance. Clinical supervision was more often mandatory, associated with failure, sometimes feared and a process of learning aimed at the expansion of practice skills. (Davys and Beddoe, 2010)

Pre-service training or preceptorship was the main context for supervision and part of a learning model involving a master and novice relationship. (Smith, 2011)

This charge was hierarchical and likely to involve high stake assessments and reports.

Aspects of this paradigm prevail today, certainly in education. This is despite a post- modern period since 2000 that saw clinical supervision develop towards a more strength-based model that was solution focussed, drew on multiple perspectives and was co-constructed between supervisor and supervisee.

This is where professional supervision begins to differentiate from a traditional view and experience of clinical supervision. It is a 'softer', more universally acceptable notion of where clinical supervision had morphed over time. Now in the education context, mentoring mirrors earlier notions of supervision. In schools it is formal advice and guidance programmes, provided to novice teachers by a designated tutor teacher. Mentoring of first time principals is facilitated by an experienced colleague and coordinated nationally by the University of Waikato.

The coaching or mentoring of experienced leaders is a maturing phenomenon within education. It's seen as a powerful way of building leadership capacity and effectiveness. (Robertson, 2005) The dimensions of coaching as defined by Robertson and others are similarly those promoted within modern professional supervision. "Coaching provides support that is safe and confidential and has as its goal the nurturing of significant personal, professional and institutional growth through a process that unfolds over time. A coach brings an outside perspective and has no stake in the status quo in an organisation." (Eddy et al, 2008. p.17)

This parallels my supervision experience where the goals were professional, the process was developmental but outcomes were both personal and administrative.

The supervisee was facilitative and supportive with no direct reporting to my employer.

That the terms are interchangeable, inconsistently defined, and confusing, clarity emerges when you identify the key functions. This enables clients, including education leaders the space to negotiate the parameters for what it can be for them.

I define professional supervision to be:

“A forum and process for critical reflection that enables personal and professional learning.”

Definition

This definition supports the proposition that the functions and tasks of supervision are to facilitate professional development, promote personal growth and support the evidence of competence and standards of work. The weighting of these are not necessarily equal and should be negotiable and fluid. They inter-relate. This builds on the clinical supervision model advanced by Morton Cooper and Palmer (2000), and supports Proctor’s Interactive Framework of formative, restorative and normative dimensions. (Driscoll & O’Sullivan, 2007)

These three elements of supervision, conceptualised in a triangle, derive from earlier work of Dawson (as cited in Kadushin, 1992), that identified the functions to be:

- Administrative – work standards and assurances
- Educational – professional learning
- Supportive – working relationships

This was largely implemented by and seen as managerial responsibility and reinforced line management practices. I believe the model still has merit, albeit better engaged and interpreted with constructivist and humanistic lenses.

This differs from the adapted conceptual model argued by Davys and Beddoe (2010) where support is placed as a means rather than an end. Although support is clearly a critical role of the supervisor, the facilitation of critical thinking and dialogue along with mediation of the connections between the tasks of supervision, are fundamental to successful outcomes. “It deals with the work and with the person doing the work.” (Carroll, cited in Shohet, 2011, p.27)

The transformational change to my leadership capability coincided with the carefully-crafted challenge to my world view and the critical reflection on the impacts and rationale for my decision-making. This fostered greater self-awareness and recognition of my personal values and beliefs. My assertion is, that for meaningful professional supervision to occur that impacts on work in a sustainable and authentic way, it must involve robust scrutiny and an interrogation of self. It is a co-construction with learning at the centre. (Carroll, 2012)

“Informational learning can happen in solitude, but transformational learning requires relationship with reflection.” (Shohet, 2011, p.10) Michael Carroll describes supervisees as “Heroes of learning”. (Cited in Shohet, 2011, p.13) My initial steps into the learning journey of supervision did require a leap of faith and a willingness to take risks and to be vulnerable. In this regard, all learners are indeed heroes to themselves! It’s this edgy space that successful supervision enables mindfulness, being present, reasoning, thinking, problem-solving, inquiry and reflective judgement. This is what a great teacher and supervisor can do. In supervision, I was challenged to write a personal charter that identified my core beliefs, creed, purpose, my proposed legacy and how I want the rest of my life to be. It has been an iterative process that I regularly return. A personal resilience has developed as a result. As the inevitable work pressures and dilemmas eventuate, I can respond with a confidence and consistency that I believe has enabled me to do my job better and to be happier doing it!

This mindfulness of self in my view, is critical to the potential of professional supervision. Our decisions in leadership are founded on assumptions and beliefs that need to be challenged and “respectfully interrupted.” (Carroll, 2011) To disturb the status quo of thinking and practice is the place where learning, growth and change happens. This was my experience but has been to date rarely available or taken up by other school principals. (Eddy et al, 2008)

The concept of reflective practice is well understood and accepted within the education sector. It underpins modern appraisal systems, evaluation processes in teaching and is fundamental to the aspirations of student learning in the New Zealand Curriculum. Reflective practice is driven by the desire to improve practice by thinking about experiences and teasing out the assumptions and perceptions that

underpin practice. This “zone of ambiguity” (Brookfield, 2009, p.294), is where supervision can guide and scaffold that reflection in a safe and supported environment. At present the mechanisms and the expertise to do this effectively are not widely evident in the education sector.

Critical to the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, and effectiveness of the reflective practice, is dialogue. It is a form of conversation whose purpose is to promote understanding and learning. (Gerard & Ellinor, 2001) Dialogue advances shared meaning, inquiry, alternate perspectives, the bigger picture and listening with a willingness to change your mind.

This conflicts with the preferred practice in the current political, industrial climate that is managerial, solution and outcome focussed, and data-driven. This is reflected in a recent Education Review Office Report (2014) that identified effective appraisal practices of principals to include:

- Evidence of progress and success related to student learning.
- Performance assessed in relation to professional standards.
- Wide range of data including views of stakeholders.
- A report on outcomes should be shared with the Board of Trustees.

This is at odds with the trend and direction supported by education researchers and leaders.

Dialogue encourages us to integrate the pieces and to pay attention to the whole.

A tension therefore exists in this current climate. How can supervision contribute to the functions of accountability, appraisal and to Davys and Beddoe’s (2011) “Service delivery” but also maintain the integrity of the whole process? The relationship

between supervisor and supervisee is critical and the principles of confidentiality and trust are potentially tested. Other considerations to be explored: How often does supervision occur? Who pays? What reports are created? Is it mandatory? What qualifications do supervisors need?

The tension between the functions is part of the supervisor's supportive role and challenge. In my view, it can be mediated, and as stated earlier, part of the negotiated and flexible agreement established at the beginning of the relationship. It is a learning partnership forged through reflection and dialogue.

Eddy et al (2008) suggest less than one third of primary and secondary school principals in New Zealand engage in supervision, and most of those were more accurately involved in mentoring. There is currently no national framework, system or resourcing allocated to the professional learning of experienced principals. Some of the few who have experienced supervision have reported concerns about confidentiality, but also espoused the benefits of personal and professional growth. (Coleman, 2011)

Implications and summative thoughts

- The education profession itself needs to take the lead in determining the nature and form of professional supervision. There is currently no political will or climate for this to be undertaken by the Ministry of Education or Teachers' Council of New Zealand.

- The mandating of professional supervision for principals should be avoided but it needs to be promoted and then undertaken because it is recognised as good practice and highly beneficial.
- The relationship between professional supervision, performance appraisal and Professional Development needs clarity and agreed understandings.
- Professional supervision should be viewed as an entitlement and made available to all principals. This would be funded by the employer and could be introduced and protected via industrial agreements.
- Any reports from supervision are owned by the principal/leader but reflective artefacts could form part of evidential portfolios for purposes of attestation and appraisal.
- An accreditation process managed by Teachers' Council could create a register of qualified and vetted supervisors.
- A pathway for experienced principals to undertake training for supervision should be encouraged through study grants and support with fees.
- An opportunity exists for a provider to initiate a pilot with supportive principals from an existing community of schools.
- There is a fertile climate in education for a model of professional supervision to establish itself as a powerful contributor to building leadership capacity and resilience.
- Naming it "Professional Supervision and Coaching" may reduce misconceptions and resistance.

Professional supervision has evolved significantly over the last century. Despite lingering ambiguity and suspicion, and the hindrance of the prevailing political world-

view, there is undoubtedly an opportunity for professional supervision to further impact positively on the helping professions, including the unrealised potential to benefit education leaders.

I am a better person and better principal because of my experience with supervision. Joan Wilmot (2015), supervisor, therapist and author describes supervision as leading us to the work we love or loving the work we do. Whatever side of the supervision see-saw you sit, you can get passionate about that!

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