

No Time to Think: Protecting the Reflective Space in Children's Services

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Abstract

Over the past few years, first line managers in child care have faced mounting pressure on their time from both the national performance management agenda, and the professional demands associated with *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* and *Working Together to Safeguard Children. A Guide to Inter-Agency Working to Safeguard and Promote the Welfare of Children*.

This paper briefly discusses the policy context surrounding this period of unprecedented change, and focuses on the potential erosion of the reflective space in supervision as first line managers' struggle to cope with the ever-increasing expectations. An argument is made for the creative use of multi-agency action learning/ research projects within the workplace to supplement individual supervision and promote reflective multi-agency child care practice; some examples of successful projects are given.

Introduction

Child care social work has every reason to be proud of its long tradition of individual case supervision, a tradition that makes it distinctive among the caring professions. However, there is evidence to suggest that traditional notions of supervision are becoming very vulnerable to the increasing pressures on first line managers as they grapple with New Labour initiative overload, 'hitting' performance targets, and pressing the next set of 'funding buttons'. These pressures now result in a form of supervision that is at considerable variance with the well-respected texts on the subject (Hawkins and Shohet, 1989; Kadushin, 1992; Morrison, 1993; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997). These texts argue that good quality supervision needs to embrace several purposes, namely accountability, support, and development. Our particular concern is with development: that in this climate the capacity of supervision to help social workers reflect on and learn from

their practice becomes compromised. The mounting pressure on managers' time comes at a time when the Assessment Framework is being implemented (Department of Health *et al.*, 1999 & 2000; Horwath, 2002); and professional demands to update and articulate empirical, theoretical and process knowledge in decision making could not be greater. Child care practice is required to move from a narrow focus on the investigation of incidents of abuse to holistic, evidence-based, multi-agency assessments of children's needs and family circumstances. This paper briefly considers the background to this squeeze on first line managers' time before suggesting that it is timely for child care agencies to learn from other multi-agency work-based learning approaches. It is argued that these have the potential to supplement the supervision process, and to become an additional resource not only for practitioners but also for first line managers.

Reacting and reflecting

Since the May 1997 election, few months have passed without news of a challenging new government initiative. Children's services, across the statutory and independent sectors, have witnessed an array of reforms under the banner of modernisation. Indeed, the language of agencies has grown to absorb words and phrases such as Quality Protects, Best Value, performance indicators, and star ratings.

Keeping up with, let alone getting ahead of, this demanding agenda comes with an inevitable cost in time. Coincidentally, child care agencies in the UK have discovered the importance of their first line managers, a point noted by Denise Platt in her first annual report as Chief Inspector of Social Services, 'What makes a significant difference to the performance of an organisation is the quality and competence of its first line managers' (Department of Health, 1999 p. 7). First line managers have moved over time to centre stage, and have taken on increasing responsibilities. They are still responsible for the supervision of practice and are still expected to be developers and supporters of staff as before; but they also have a crucial role in budget management, in

providing information for local and national evaluation, and in making joined up services a reality for children and families. They are vital cogs in the machinery of modernisation and performance management.

This demanding agenda has steadily reduced the typical first line manager's time for the educative and supportive functions of supervision, a problem referred to by Moira Gibb, former President of the Association of Directors of Social Services, in her evidence to the Climbié Inquiry: 'Social workers no longer had time to reflect on their work', and 'supervision sessions had effectively been reduced to an opportunity for managers to check the correct forms had been completed' (Batty, 2002). In those agencies worst hit by the crisis in recruitment, this squeeze will be felt more acutely; inadequate support of staff is also a key factor in staff leaving. This leads to a vicious cycle of poor staff retention and the erosion of supervision time as yet more staff choose to vote with their feet. Taught (and accepted) as a vehicle for accountability, support and development, supervision becomes mainly concerned with a narrow version of performance management, focusing on ensuring that procedures have been followed and that social workers are practising within agency expectations. It emphasises reaction and compliance, not critical reflection and an opportunity to question. Our concern is that this sense of too much to do and too little time will not go away; and that therefore the reliance on individual supervision as the main (or only) vehicle for work-based learning is misplaced. If this analysis is correct, we will continue to risk the safety and well-being of children, and the reputations of social workers. As many reports highlight (London Borough of Greenwich, 1987; National Institute for Social Work, 1996; Reder and Duncan, 1999), learning through reflection on practice is a basic requirement for all professionals, not a luxury for those who happen to be in well-resourced teams with no vacancies and manageable workloads. Reflection helps professionals to generate competing hypotheses about the nature of the problem and what to do about it; and to define their evidence base from relevant theory and research: the foundation of good practice which underpins the Assessment Framework (Department of Health *et al.*, 1999; Department of Health, 2000). We argue in the rest of this paper that this situation can be improved, if child care agencies look beyond their boundaries

at approaches to work-based learning elsewhere. We focus on multi-agency action learning and research projects designed to improve service delivery to children and families.

Protecting the reflective space

There is a growing literature on action learning and research within professional settings in general (Kember, 2000; McGill and Beaty, 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2001), and within health and social care settings in particular (Bate, 2000; Randall Cowley and Tomlinson, 2000; Waterson, 2000; Jones, Treseder and Glennie, 2002). Both action research and action learning share a similar foundation: learning results from reflection on experience. However, Kember (2000, p. 35) sums up the difference as follows: 'Action research is always a learning process, but a methodical and rigorous form of action learning in which results are published. All action research projects are therefore action learning projects, but the converse does not hold true'. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term action research as the more rigorous method; and as an encouragement to those currently involved in or contemplating action learning/ research projects to disseminate the findings of their projects.

The advantage of action research is that it is participative, qualitative and practical. The world of practice is frequently characterised by the unpredictable; the reflective space needs to address why and how people do things as much as what they do. Action research involves people as co-researchers, shaping their inquiry as the group moves between action and reflection, exploring and evaluating ways of improving their practice. If the reflective space in supervision is being eroded, then the supervisee may resort to solitary self-reflection. For an inexperienced and naïve worker, such isolation may lead to ineffective or dangerous practice. Action research has the potential to provide a supportive, learning environment for the group as a whole and for the individuals within it. In Randall *et al.*'s action research study, two groups of child care social workers and a group of health visitors looked at overcoming barriers to effective practice. The findings of their study

stressed the importance of 'holding environments to promote effective learning' and 're-invigorating models of supervision that can sustain high quality practice' (Randall *et al.* 2000, p.343). In their view action learning offers such a resource to individuals who may feel somewhat isolated and alienated within large-scale organisations as their managers individually and collectively grapple with the change agenda. Another study (Jones *et al.*, 2002) involved five different multi-agency action research groups meeting every two months over the course of a year with the aim of improving service delivery to their particular family; family members chose to participate in a number of ways including attendance at a group meeting. In order to promote evidence-based practice, each action research group was resourced with a set of articles. These were organised around topics that had been identified earlier, through a literature search, as characterising some of the difficulties experienced by sample families, such as domestic violence, adult mental health, and substance misuse; groups also had access to other key texts. Interestingly, one of the key findings of the study was that the needs of the family members and the professionals were remarkably similar: both valued relationships built on trust and honesty that are consistent over time and permit a reflective space for the exploration of difficulties. The ability to reflect on the evidence base of practice and the process of multi-agency working in a learning rather than blame culture was seen as crucial to improving outcomes for children in need and their families.

New opportunities

If the time for individual supervision of child care social workers is under threat from the demands of performance management, multi-agency action research projects may offer a valuable way forward for the practice evidence base to be articulated; and for the process issues within families, family-professional systems and the professional systems themselves to be explored and addressed. The face-to-face contact in these groups provides the direct communication that is essential if there is to be a truly multi-agency, holistic assessment of children's needs and family circumstances. As well as reviewing current demands on first line managers, staff working in local

authorities would do well to look at how multi-agency action research projects might supplement the supervision of front line staff. The resultant learning culture would also go some way towards meeting first line managers' own needs for reflection and support in their pivotal role.

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