Guidance Counselling Supervision in a School Context

The Department of Education and Skills funds the provision of guidance counselling supervision for guidance counsellors in post primary schools. This support system is managed by Monaghan Education centre and co-ordinated through the local IGC branch network. This article looks at the processes involved in supervision.

In this article I will discuss the Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) '7-Eyed Model', a conceptual process-oriented supervision model. The models' strengths and limitations are explored with particular regard to whether or not it serves the supervisory needs of Irish school guidance counsellor supervisee groups.

Critique of the model distils the core conditions necessary for effective group supervision, and the challenge of balancing the group supervision format with the diversity of individual supervisees needs within it. Specific developments for school guidance counsellors’ supervision are called for, to maximise the potential use of this model in the school context.

Introduction

The Humanistic Person-Centred counselling approach, originally developed in the USA, is predominantly used among school counsellors in the UK and USA and other English-speaking countries including Australia and Ireland. This model is also the predominant model used in Irish school guidance counsellor group supervision with an integrated mix of the conceptual process orientated models such as the Page & Wosket, and the Hawkins & Shohet, depending on the training, competence and preference of the supervisor and supervisees.

Group guidance clinical supervision has been provided by the Department of Education for more than 10 years as it acknowledges the professional benefits of enhancing skill, competence and accountability to student clients and to the profession. Research had reported supervision to be beneficial and vital (Agnew et al., 2000; Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Gallo, 2013) and had found evidence for benefits such as improved knowledge and skills (Agnew et al., 2000; Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001) and increased support (Linton, 2003; McMahon & Patton, 2001).

Core Conditions Necessary for Effective Group Supervision using the 7 Eyed model

In Weak, 2002, ‘the supervisory relationship’ emerged as the central component of good supervision. Essential to the meaning of good supervision is the supervisors’ ability to create a safe, equal supervisory space. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) note that having a shared sense of purpose, a “collective endeavour” (P.184), is at the heart of their model of an effective working supervisory group. If the supervisor can exhibit goodwill, then a potential
for creating safe, trusted, reflective space continued support, validation, challenge, empathy and opportunity for learning can be realised, (Proctor, 2008; Scaife, 2009; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Steen, 2012, McMahon, 2014).

Experiential feedback from supervisee groups indicates that guidance counselling within a school system has become more pressurised as a result of having to attend to very large numbers of students in a short timeframe. The Wellbeing Program promotes use of directive psycho-educative strategies such as imparting the fundamental skills of CBT and Solution Focused Therapy in counselling to nurture resilience in students. However, overuse by counsellors of these strategies in a hope for quick cognitive and behavioural change in their students may have associated risks. With the pressurised workload and time constraints in schools, there is a danger that this would become the default for guidance counsellors, overvaluing the short term benefit of ‘solution focus’ at the cost of ‘counselling process’. It is important that school guidance counsellors are aware of the shortcomings of these strategies, and the risk of unintentionally promoting feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and mistrust in students.

Hawkins & Shohet’s emphasis is on exploring (client) students’ unique strengths, on maximising validation and affirmation and on empowering the vulnerable and fragile adolescent to self-direct. This takes time, a resource that schools too often lack.

Within group supervision, if the supervisor is not skilled in managing a blame free dynamic, s/he risks losing the engagement of the guidance supervisee which in turn can impact the student client. Relying on the supervisor’s sense of what constitutes constructive criticism and the skill to relay it could be viewed as a limitation to this model. Supervisees can be anxious about consistent evaluation (Stoltenberg et al., 1998) and therefore trust in one’s supervisor is vital for the success of group therapeutic engagement and improved learning. Hewson (2001) suggests that in this regard, supervision is as much an ‘art’ as it is a ‘science’.

Diversity of developmental levels and needs of supervisees

Supervisors need to consider the unique needs and concerns of their individual guidance supervisees so as to provide adequate support and appropriate interventions (De Stefano et al., 2007). Modes 4 and 5 of the Hawkins and Shohet model stress the need for an ability to simultaneously focus on the relational interactions (client /supervisee and supervisee / supervisor) and the dynamics of supervisory process, while also processing potential influences from work and social contexts. The capacity of the supervisee to attend to the psychodynamic processes and theoretical aspects of the 7 eyed model determines continued engagement and learning. The diversity of counselling skills training and experience among guidance supervisees has considerable implications for the introduction and application of these supervision models. Some level of prior training in psychotherapy is ideally required of the supervisee to maximise the benefit of this model, possibly given through focused CPD training.

A lack of this would have implications for some guidance counsellors gaining full benefit from various supervisory models. It is expected that advanced levels of development would be evident in supervisees with more experience and training than in supervisees with less training (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). It would follow that as supervisees gain experience in supervision and counselling, their skills, theoretical grounding, and case conceptualizations may begin to approximate those of the supervisor (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Page and Wosket (2001), stress the need for skill in distinguishing between transference, counter transference and the parallel process. They claim that it is important not to ignore these dynamics, as how the supervisor responds is probably how the supervisee will respond to the client. Morrissey & Tribe, (2001), identify the requirement for high levels of supervisor self-awareness, to enable them detect and address supervisory dynamics. Unchecked destructive processes such as scapegoating, or defensiveness and competitiveness, may impinge on openness, safe exploration and learning. This can result in guidance counsellors being defensive about aspects of their work or following suggestions inappropriately. If the supervisor is inexperienced or overwhelmed in trying to process underlying interpersonal dynamics, needs and sensitivities as in the seven eyed model, then managing group dynamics becomes less of a resource and becomes instead “an unruly animal that has to be tamed and controlled” (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012: P.180).

Implications and Future Directions

The permeating of boundaries to allow for deliberation on parallel processing may not be easily tolerated among a very differentiated group, especially when openness and trust must prevail as much as a willingness to accept ambivalent and negative feelings from supervisees on one’s work (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). I have concerns about the application of the 7-Eyed Model unless the supervisor is capable of overcoming the disparate levels of skills and experience within the group.
Conclusion
The core conditions for effective supervision using the model were elucidated. Key issues are the Models’ reliance on supervisor skill to create a safe trusting space for open vulnerability, skill in using the model, skill in facilitating supervisees to process intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics while often balancing individual supervisee’s conflicting diverse, professionally developmental needs. Only if the supervisee is at least acquainted with this conceptual supervision model can he/she engage at the depth required to gain full value from it in the limited time set for their supervisory sessions.

As long as the 7-Eyed Model is the predominant model promoted for use by Irish school guidance counsellor supervisors, there is a need to fund and develop the provision of CPD training in the fundamentals of this process-oriented supervision. Various other supervision models could also address the school guidance counsellors’ needs. Anecdotal evidence from supervisees indicates that consideration should also be given to provision of one to one supervision for all school guidance counsellors in the light of the responsibilities they carry and the risks to their wellbeing.

The Author
Clare Finegan works as a guidance counsellor/psychotherapist/supervisor in the North East Branch of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and is a doctorate student (psychotherapy) at DCU. Clare can be contacted at clarefineganstormyweather@gmail.com

References


