

SUPERVISION IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY: WHERE WILL THE FUTURE TAKE US?

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This article discusses the nature of supervision within school psychology. An overview of relevant literature and empirical research is provided with the intention of proposing future directions for supervision research. The future of school psychology supervision is conjectured upon by developing suggestions that will facilitate training, continuing professional development, and effective service delivery. © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Introduction

This article discusses the complexities of supervision by addressing issues related to definitional confusion and types of supervision. In addition, a description of supervision within school psychology is discussed by reviewing relevant literature and empirical research. Finally, the future of school psychology supervision is conjectured upon by developing suggestions that will facilitate training, continuing professional development, and effective service delivery.

Definition of Supervision

Definitions of supervision found within the school psychology literature predominately link supervision to practicing school psychologists. For example, both Knoff (1986) and Strein (1996) defined supervision within the context of facilitating effective delivery of school psychological services and promoting continuing professional development of practicing school psychologists. As a result, it would not be difficult for the novice to conclude supervision is provided only within school settings. Nothing could be further from the truth! Supervision should not be interpreted as being setting specific, although the setting can influence the type, process, and outcomes of supervision one receives. Inevitably, definitions describe supervision as an interpersonal activity between a supervisor and supervisee with the goal of developing and enhancing the supervisee's professional competencies (Knoff; Strein). Although most supervision is provided didactically, very few definitions have included group supervision. This is surprising since group supervision is utilized extensively within university and internship settings. Lastly, definitions allude to the hierarchical nature of the supervision relationship between the supervisor and supervisee (Knoff; Murphy, 1981; Strein). Here again, it may be too limiting a definition to imply supervision is hierarchical and didactic. With a lack of qualified supervisors, time constraints, and the cost prohibitive nature of providing supervision within schools (Zins, Murphy, & Wess, 1989), group and peer supervision are becoming viable alternatives to receiving individual supervision.

As one can readily determine, defining supervision can be difficult. Fagan and Wise (1994) noted: "... definitions are difficult to write and achieve consensus on" (p. 2). As a result, it is unlikely consensus will be reached on any definition of supervision. However, we developed the following definition reflective of the current state of supervision within school psychology:

Supervision is an interpersonal interaction between two or more individuals for the purpose of sharing knowledge, assessing professional competencies, and providing objective feedback

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with the terminal goals of developing new competencies, facilitating effective delivery of psychological services, and maintaining professional competencies.

The aforementioned definition is not specifically linked to practicing school psychologists nor does the definition limit supervision to didactic interpersonal interactions. It also does not allude to supervision as hierarchical but does recognize the formality of supervision by the sharing of professional knowledge, the provision of objective feedback, and the utilization of constructive appraisal. In comparison to prior definitions of supervision, the present definition continues to recognize the need for supervision to facilitate psychological services and the role of supervision in continuing professional development. In addition, it adds the goal of developing new competencies.

Types of Supervision

The term 'supervision' has often been used generically within the school psychology literature to refer to both university- and field-based supervision, leaving the reader to determine its applicability to a particular setting (i.e., university-based, internship setting, field-based). Furthermore, although we advocate for a definition of supervision that is not linked specifically to a particular setting, we do recognize how the setting can influence the type, process, and outcomes of supervision. Therefore, some discussion is warranted to delineate the types and levels of supervision predominate within school psychology and to demonstrate the need to conduct research that is setting and type specific.

Supervision is provided within a number of contexts within the university setting, ranging from consequential supervision provided in conjunction with specific courses (e.g., intellectual assessment, behavioral interventions, counseling with children) to regularly scheduled, in-depth, supervision related to university-based practica and internships. Supervision within school psychology graduate programs is also more likely to be hierarchical in nature and have a more educative focus as compared to field-based and postdoctoral internship supervision. Depending upon the training program, supervision can come in many forms. Although most program faculty are involved in providing some form of supervision related to helping students develop their psychological skills, the use of advanced graduate students in providing supervision is also highly utilized within training programs. Here too, the supervision provided by advanced graduate students tends to vary greatly, ranging from providing supervision related to specific courses (e.g., neuropsychological assessment, counseling, behavioral interventions) to providing intensive supervision within university-based clinics. In addition to using graduate students to provide formal supervision, it is not uncommon for students to provide informal peer supervision. As a result, the peer supervision many students receive as part of their training can range from being highly structured and formalized to being relatively impromptu and informal. School psychology training programs also provide both individual and group supervision as part of their curricula.

As with university-based supervision, field-based supervision is provided in a variety of contexts and formats. For the most part, the school psychology literature has linked field-based supervision with postdegree nondoctoral-level school psychologists. However, it seems reasonable to include individuals in pre- and postdoctoral internships within the category of those receiving field-based supervision. Regardless, individual, group, and peer supervision are provided within all the aforementioned field-based settings.

The complexities of supervision become apparent when attempting to identify the different types and levels of supervision provided within the various settings. Unfortunately, little research has been published exploring the role, processes, and goals of supervision specific to the aforementioned settings and levels of training. Theoretical models have been identified to assist supervisors when supervising school psychology interns (Conoley & Bahns, 1995) as well as competencies need-

ed to provide quality supervision (Kratochwill, Bergan, & Mace, 1981; Murphy, 1981). However, empirical research demonstrating the effectiveness of specific supervision models or specific supervisor competencies that lead to more effective school psychologists is lacking (Ross & Goh, 1993). As Knoff (1986) astutely noted, research is needed that attempts to understand the many facets of supervision, which, to mention a few, include the setting, supervisor characteristics, supervisee characteristics, process issues, contextual issues, and interpersonal dynamics. Not until school psychology recognizes the complexity of supervision and attempts to conduct systematic research focused on gaining a better understanding of its many facets will supervision become more prevalent (Knoff).

Review of Literature

Although supervision has been advocated as a way to enhance the delivery of school psychological services (Knoff, 1986; Ross & Goh, 1993) and as essential to continuing professional development (Fowler & Harrison, 1995; Ross-Reynolds & Grimes, 1981), there has actually been limited school psychology literature published on the topic. In fact, a literature review conducted by Bahr et al. (1996) found only 34 PsychLit database entries related to supervision and school psychology. In comparison, counseling, clinical, and counselor education had 100, 125, and 468 entries, respectively, related to supervision (Bahr et al.). The small number of articles is surprising since both the American Psychological Association (APA, 1981) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 1984) heralded supervision as essential to the practice and professional development of school psychologists. In addition, over a decade ago a special issue of *School Psychology Review* (Ross-Reynolds & Grimes) was devoted entirely to supervision! Given this early recognition and promotion, one wonders why there has not been a plethora of research exploring the efficacy of supervision. In contrast, there has been very little empirical research to substantiate the effectiveness of supervision on enhancing the skills of school psychologists or on the services they provide.

Articles that have been published on supervision have predominately focused on (a) clinical supervision practices within the field (Knoff, 1986; Ross & Goh, 1993; Westervelt & Brantley, 1981; Zins et al., 1989); (b) the congruence of supervision practices with professional standards (Ross & Goh; Zins et al.); (c) the role of supervision within school psychology training programs (Ward & Brantley, 1981; Westervelt & Brantley); (d) the provision of effective supervision (Bowser, 1981; Kratochwill et al., 1981); and (e) the evaluation of models of supervision (Bahr et al., 1996). Of these, only a few were data based (e.g., Ross & Goh; Zins et al.) and none attempted to demonstrate that supervision led to more effective school psychologists or to more effective client outcomes.

Significant insights as to the nature of supervision within school psychology can be derived from the few empirical studies conducted to date. Zins et al. (1989) reported that less than 25% of the school psychologists surveyed ($n = 399$) were receiving either individual or group supervision. In a more recent study, Ross and Goh (1993) reported approximately 32% of the school psychologists surveyed ($n = 331$) were receiving supervision. Both these studies suggest a large number of school psychologists are not receiving any type of formal supervision. Of those receiving supervision, the majority received less than 1 hour of supervision per week and the supervision was likely to be provided by nondoctoral individuals whose terminal degree was in an area *other than school psychology* (Zins et al.). Both studies found supervision was most likely to be provided on an as-needed basis as opposed to being provided during regularly scheduled, structured times. The most common activities reported during supervision were reviewing psychoeducational reports, conducting case reviews, and providing feedback (Zins et al.). Although 95% of respondents in the Zins et al. study believed school psychologists should receive supervision, only 37.1% of those who received supervision reported that it actually improved their service delivery skills. Both studies concluded that current supervision practices did not comply with APA or NASP professional standards. The Ross and Goh study also found only approximately 25% of those surveyed had received any formal

training on supervision while attending graduate school. Of the 25% who had received training on supervision, only 11.2% received their training within school psychology programs.

Preliminary research has been conducted exploring the activities during supervision and the perceptions of supervisors and supervisees during the supervision process within training programs (Ward & Brantley, 1981; Westervelt & Brantley, 1981). These studies, although based upon relatively small sample sizes, do provide conceptually strong support for continued research on the processes of supervision within training programs. Although there were small differences depending on year in graduate school, there was a high consistency among university supervisors and students in their perceptions that supervision time was spent discussing technical information related to psychoeducational assessments and interventions (Westervelt & Brantley). The strong focus on assessment during supervision is not surprising since many school psychology programs dedicate a large portion of their coursework to assessment (e.g., intellectual, curriculum-based, practicum). However, unfortunately, the focus on assessment appears to continue as the dominant activity during field-based supervision (Zins et al., 1989). There also appears to be more of a focus on discussing interventions during university-based supervision compared to field-based supervision. Students in the Westervelt and Brantley study also identified supervisor behaviors that were detrimental to the supervision process, such as being nondirective, ambiguous, not providing enough positive feedback, and "telling war stories." In contrast, being overly dependent and poorly organized were characteristics of supervisees that supervisors found to be detrimental to the supervision process. University-based supervisors also identified the desirable supervisee behaviors that contributed to quality supervision as presenting information clearly, being assertive, considering feedback, being prepared, and knowing when to request additional assistance and feedback at appropriate times (Westervelt & Brantley). Although these studies should be seen as preliminary to more rigorous research, the findings demonstrate the need for a more extensive exploration of the interpersonal and attributional processes of university-based and field-based supervision that is perceived to contribute to quality supervision.

The Future of Supervision in School Psychology

It is clear, based upon current practices and the literature, that school psychology supervision research continues to be in a formative stage. In addition, it is obvious that school psychology has made little progress since the early 1980s toward gaining a better understanding of the nature of supervision within the profession. There is also the continued need to demonstrate that supervision leads to more competent school psychologists, is effective in enhancing school psychological services, and contributes to the professional growth of practicing school psychologists. Why, then, the lethargic response by the field toward conducting supervision efficacy research?

One can only speculate as to why supervision has largely been ignored in the school psychology literature. One possible impediment is that designing, implementing, conducting, and analyzing supervision research would be a monumental endeavor few researchers are prepared undertake. Although advancements in computer technology and statistics would allow researchers to study numerous variables simultaneously, little is known about which variables related to supervision should be studied. One approach would be to take proposed models on supervision and begin to identify variables within these models that could be linked to preferred outcomes. Many of the models currently designed to facilitate supervision have theoretical underpinnings and, therefore, could serve as the basis for future study. As Knoff (1986) indicated, this research should be systematic and attempt to identify process, contextual, and interpersonal variables as well as the interactions among these variables that contribute to effective supervision. In contrast, a more pragmatic approach might be to begin answering very specific questions related to the supervision process. As Ross and Goh (1993) suggested, questions related to what is an effective supervisor, what is an effective school

psychologist, or what outcomes should be expected from supervision could initially be addressed to identify criteria to evaluate supervision outcomes. The initial results of these studies might facilitate more sophisticated supervision research.

Qualitative research can also provide the profession with a better understanding of supervision. Individual case studies that explore interpersonal dynamics, analyze supervision dialogue, and make interpretive conclusions on how the environmental context impacts the process of supervision could provide information leading to more empirical-based research. Studies utilizing small samples are also encouraged. Although these studies would have limited generalizability, the data may assist in problem identification.

Another possible impediment to conducting supervision research may be, plainly speaking, a lack of interest from practitioners in the field to become involved in research. There is also little impetus for engaging in supervision since most states do not require school psychologists to receive supervision (Zins et al., 1989), further reducing the opportunities for research. However, there does appear to be a small percentage of school psychologists who do receive supervision and who could be utilized when conducting comparative or outcome studies.

The increased continuing professional development opportunities for school psychologists at the state and national levels over the past decade may also compete with the ideology of supervision as a viable method of maintaining professional competencies. School psychologists currently have more highly structured, focused, and time efficient professional development opportunities than were available 15 years ago. To continue to promote supervision as a means for maintaining professional competencies may lack legitimacy among practitioners within the field. The hierarchical nature of supervision may also make it difficult for many school psychologists to accept or continue supervision. Alternative approaches toward providing supervision will need to be developed and promoted to increase the likelihood of school psychologists engaging in such activities. Mentoring programs within school districts for beginning-level school psychologists, a formal process for receiving continuing professional development credits for supervision activities, and more opportunities for peer supervision may be viable alternatives to increasing the number willing to become engaged in supervision activities.

Conclusions

Prior literature has specified areas in which supervision research should focus and many of these areas have already been identified in the present article. However, as the profession moves into the 21st century, additional focal areas for supervision research will begin to emerge. It is expected that supervision research will need to address the different types of supervision provided within both university- and field-based settings. A better understanding of how faculty and peer supervision facilitates student learning and transference of knowledge to applied settings will need to be studied more closely. There is also the need to better refine how beginning-level school psychologists attain mastery of psychological and educational skills within their first three to five years in the school setting. Given that most supervision activities provided within the schools are related to reviewing psychoeducational reports and cases studies (Zins et al., 1989), it is expected that only a small percentage of beginning school psychologists actually have their professional performance directly observed by their supervisor. There seems to be an assumption that once students graduate from school psychology training programs, they are fully competent in the administration and interpretation of psychological and educational measures.

As several states require the supervision of nondoctoral level school psychologists by doctoral-level psychologists, the efficacy and appropriateness of this requirement should be evaluated. Likewise, research that investigates whether receiving additional training in supervision results in better supervisors as well as better skill attainment among their supervisees would be of value.

In conclusion, the future of supervision appears tenuous and uncertain, particularly within the school setting. Given that there has been significant promotion and advocacy over the past 15 years for practicing school psychologists to become engaged in supervision, it is unlikely that there will be a significant increase in the numbers receiving supervision over the next decade. In contrast, it is more likely that there will be a shift toward increased focus on supervision practices within university training programs and predoctoral internships.

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