

Structured peer group supervision by email:
An option for school guidance and counselling personnel

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Abstract

Supervision is a mechanism for providing support for school counsellors and peer group supervision has been found to be beneficial. Indeed, supervision is most often conducted in face-to-face interactions. However, advances in technology have opened up new possibilities for supervision via use of the internet. The present study evaluates a structured peer group supervision program conducted for school counsellors using email. The findings indicate that email can be an effective medium through which to conduct supervision and that the use of a structured peer group supervision process is helpful.

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School guidance and counselling is complex multidimensional work that frequently involves cases of high emotional intensity. This is compounded for many school counsellors in Australia who practice to a great degree in isolation from other counselling professionals (Barletta, 1996). They are isolated by the nature of their employment and by the nature of their profession. In addition, some are geographically isolated from their peers.

Supervision is a means of providing support for school counsellors (Sutton & Page, 1994). Indeed, the reason most frequently cited by school counsellors for wanting supervision is the provision of professional support (Borders & Usher, 1992; McMahon & Patton, 2000; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page). In addition to support, school counsellors want professional growth and development and skill development from supervision (Borders & Usher; McMahon & Patton; Roberts & Borders; Sutton & Page).

However for over a decade, studies in The United States of America and Australia have shown that school counsellors want supervision but that many do not receive it (Borders & Usher, 1992; McMahon & Patton, 2000; McMahon & Solas, 1996; Page, Pietrzak & Sutton, 2001; Sutton & Page, 1994). In the absence of an adequate amount of supervision, a previous Australian study (McMahon & Patton, 2001) found that school counsellors use informal peer networks to seek the support they desire and to address their feelings of isolation.

The ability of peers to support each other has been documented in previous studies of peer group supervision for school counsellors (Agnew, Vaught, Getz, & Fortune, 2000; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Crutchfield et al., 1997). In addition to support, these studies found that school counsellors benefited through feedback on "counselling skills, approaches and perspective taking" (Crutchfield & Borders, 1997, p. 227). Crutchfield et al. attest to the importance of having an external facilitator for the group supervision process and doubted that their positive results would have been achieved without one. Crutchfield and Borders found evidence to suggest that without a trained supervisor present the emphasis of peer group supervision was on collegial support more than feedback on skills and techniques. These previous studies used structured models of group supervision as their process and Crutchfield and Borders suggest that supervision groups with structure are preferable. It has been suggested that structure improves a group's productivity, decreases conflict and resistance, enables all group members to participate and receive feedback (Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Hart, Morris, & Betz, 1994; Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Morris, Betz, & Hart, 1991), and is helpful in the early stages of group development (Stockton & Morran, 1980, 1981).

Much of what has previously been written on supervision focuses on the need for people to meet in person. However advances with computer technology have opened up new possibilities via the use of the internet (Myrick & Sabella, 1995; Sampson, Kolodinski, & Greeno, 1997). Sampson et al. claim that supervision is a potential application of the information highway. They posit that the use of such technology to involve remote personnel

in supervision may be cost effective. However, Sampson et al. also raise concerns about ethical issues related to the use of the information highway including confidentiality, lack of awareness of location specific factors, and equality of access to the internet and the information highway. They also express concern about potential relationship development issues in counselling and supervision using technology, and suggest that further research is needed to clarify these issues.

Myrick and Sabella (1995) described a process of email supervision whereby a group of supervisees accessed each other's feedback and ideas via email communication without any actual 'real-time' interaction. They claimed that email supervision offers counsellors "the basis of a network that conveniently connects counselors and supervisors, individually and in groups" (Myrick & Sabella, 1995, p. 39). In this study supervisees requested help of their email colleagues in a similar way to members of other organised supervision groups, that is they outlined their case by describing their client, the presenting problem, behaviours related to the problem, counsellor interventions, and expressed their concerns. Their request was transmitted to other group members via the supervisor. A particular advantage of this method of supervision over telephone calls is that the supervisee gets a written response from several colleagues which can be kept. The authors noted that the participants found more advantages in the process than limitations.

No previous study of email supervision has been conducted in Australia. The aim of the present study was to evaluate a process of email supervision for school counsellors. In light of previous studies demonstrating the value of peer support for school counsellors and the value of structure in peer group supervision, a structured process of peer group supervision was chosen.

Method

Participants

The participants were 28 members of a professional school guidance and counselling association who responded to an invitation sent to all members of the association inviting them to participate in an email supervision project. All participants were registered teachers who had postgraduate training in school guidance and counselling. Six males and 22 females participated. Their years of experience in school guidance and counselling ranged from less than six months to 21 years with the average being 8.56 years. Of the participants, eight worked in private or Catholic schools or colleges of technical and further education, and the others worked in the state education authority. Of the participants, 12 worked in a large metropolitan area, and the rest worked in rural and regional areas, including two from very remote locations. At the time of the study five of the participants did not have a supervisor, 19 were located within an hour's driving time of their supervisor, two were located more than an hour's driving time from their supervisor, and two were located more than four hour's driving time from their supervisor. The geographically closest colleagues of seven participants worked in the same location. A further 18 participants were located within 10 kilometres of their nearest colleague, three were located more than 25 kilometres from their nearest

colleague including one who was located hundreds of kilometres from the nearest colleague. At the time of the study six of the participants were not participating in supervision, 17 were participating in supervision every month or more frequently, three received supervision infrequently and one participated in supervision on a needs basis. Of the participants, five claimed to be very satisfied with their present supervisory arrangements, eight were satisfied, and nine claimed to be dissatisfied. The remaining six either did not answer the question or gave multiple answers, for example a different response for peer supervision and individual supervision. Three participants, two females and a male all from the state education authority, discontinued their participation during the project as a result of changed employment circumstances and insurmountable technological difficulties.

Procedure

All participants were allocated to a supervision group containing four members. In total there were seven supervision groups. Where possible each group contained at least one male, at least one participant from the non-state system, and no more than two participants from the large metropolitan area. Groups were coded A – G, and participants were numbered 1 – 4. Participants were not told the names of others in their group in order to preserve the integrity of the program. All emails were sent to the researcher who facilitated the supervision process and forwarded them on to other group members.

The email supervision project was conducted over a period of twelve weeks. During the first week a preliminary survey was conducted and the data analysed and some of the findings reported to the participants. In particular, information was provided to the participants about their hopes for the supervision, their possible contributions, their concerns about participating in the project. Participants were advised prior to completing the survey that this reporting would occur and that no identifiable data would be reported. Also during the first week all of the participants sent a greeting to other group members through the facilitator.

All participants were provided with a set of four supervision proformas titled preparing for supervision, supervision presentation form, peer response proforma, presenter response to peers. These proformas guided the supervision process by outlining the process in which all cases and feedback were presented. In addition the participants were provided with a timetable of expectations including when they were expected to present a case, respond to cases or respond to supervision they had received. During the project, the facilitator distributed a newsletter to participants each week. In addition, the facilitator kept groups up to date with any delays or problems.

Each week one participant from each group presented a case or issue for supervision in the format outlined on the proforma. All cases were sent to the facilitator who, after ensuring that no identifiable data was contained, forwarded them on to the relevant group members. Group members then had a week to write a response to the case and send it to the facilitator. The facilitator pasted the responses into one document and forwarded them to the case presenter and other group members. The case presenter then had a week to respond to

the feedback using the feedback response proforma. Each participant presented and received feedback to two cases during the time of the project.

Measure

Data was gathered by means of questionnaires, one prior to the commencement of the project and the second at the conclusion of the project. Both were distributed and collected as email attachments. It is the findings of the post-project questionnaire that will be reported here. The post-project evaluation questionnaire included 15 open-ended questions. Two questions sought information on the best aspects of the project and what the participants disliked. Three questions elicited information on personal gains and professional gains, and whether any anticipated gains had not been met. Two questions asked whether their concerns about participating in the project had been adequately addressed and whether their expectations of other participants were met. Five questions elicited feedback on the supervision process itself, specifically time, the supervision relationship with other members, supervision facilitation, the structured supervision process, and the proformas. Two questions sought suggestions on how email supervision could be done differently and whether participants would recommend email supervision to others.

Data analysis

The questionnaires were collated by question and the response of each participant was labelled with a participant identification number. Each question was analysed separately in a process consistent with those suggested by Strauss (1987) and Neuman (1997). While the questions themselves identified the major topics, initial reading of the responses to each question facilitated the identification of conceptual themes and the development of codes by the researcher. The codes were entered in the margins beside the responses. In subsequent readings, the codes were refined and the number of responses for each code was totalled. Representative statements were identified for reporting purposes.

Results

What will be reported here are the findings of the fifteen questions of the post-project questionnaire. In total 24 post-project questionnaires were returned. Three of the original participants discontinued with the project and one was unable to complete the post-project questionnaire for personal reasons. In answering the questionnaires participants could indicate more than one response for each of the open-ended questions. What will be reported here are the conceptual themes identified under each of the major topics followed in brackets by the number of participants whose responses could be categorised according to the themes. Where appropriate representative statements will be included in quotation marks.

What participants liked best.

Over half of the participants (15) indicated that they particularly liked the feedback and new ideas they obtained throughout the project. Closely related to receiving these benefits were sharing (9) and feelings of being supported and connected with colleagues. A number (16) commented on liking the supervision process particularly having an opportunity

to reflect (7), the anonymity (4), and the convenience of choosing when and where they participated.

What participants disliked.

Issues related to time were what more than half of the participants (16) disliked about the project. For example, some (5) disliked having to wait a week for feedback and for some (5), the “demand on my time” or “finding the time to respond” were aspect of the project they disliked. Some of the participants (7) commented on aspects of the supervision process as dislikes and cited examples such as “doing one case per week”, “not being able to follow through in person” and the inflexibility of the process. A small number cited personal issues that they disliked including “agonising about the tone of a comment”, “a rather negative reaction to one of the participants” and not “always liking the feedback”. Only one participant indicated a lack of technology skills as a dislike.

Gains from the project.

Participants were asked to comment on what they had gained out of the project personally and professionally. Personal gains will be reported first followed by professional gains.

At a personal level most participants (18) indicated that they gained a sense of connectedness, affirmation, support and confirmation. Others (8) claim to have gained in terms of personal growth, challenge, self-confidence, and self-awareness. A further three gained skills, strategies and new ideas.

At a professional level all except one of the participants gained professionally from the supervision project. The participant who did not gain professionally believed that other participants had “enforced limited understanding” of his/her “unique ... context” as a result of maintaining anonymity in the project. Over half of the participants (15) gained professionally from new ideas and strategies and others (8) gained through professional dialogue, and connectedness with and support of colleagues. A small number gained in terms of self-confidence, self-awareness and personal growth.

Anticipated gains that were not met.

Most of the participants (17) indicated that their anticipated gains were met. Those whose anticipated gains were not met included one participant whose work role was different from other participants and one whose work context was different from other participants. One indicated that in order to maintain anonymity he/she had not been able to reveal enough contextual information for suggestions and feedback to be appropriate. Other participants whose anticipated gains were not met included one who “hoped that it would make professional life a little easier”, one who wanted “a long term conversation about an issue or case” and one who hoped that the “supervisor would have made a comment about the case”.

Initial concerns.

Of the participants who had an initial concern about time (11), all found ways of managing. In relation to concerns expressed in the pre-project questionnaire about the process, participants commented that “it (the project) worked well” and “the process appeared

to be well thought through in its planning". The initial concerns of some participants about what others would think of them and the value of their contributions to others seem to have been allayed during the process. For example, one commented that "presenters' responses indicated that I had suggested some helpful ideas" and another remarked that "every case I commented upon or authored gave me another step towards professional development and growth". Some participants expressed initial concerns about confidentiality but indicated that these had been addressed in the project.

Expectations of other participants.

Most of the participants (18) indicated that their expectations of other participants were met and their comments about the contribution of others were positive. For example, participants commented that "the level of ideas and insights were more than I expected", "they (other participants) turned out to be highly professional and insightful operators", "other group members exceeded my expectations in terms of the amount and quality of the feedback that was given", and that "they put in a lot of effort and their responses were considered". In general they were appreciative of the feedback given by other group members. Four of the participants indicated that they had no prior expectations of the participants. Only one participant indicated that his/her expectations were not always met and attributed it to the medium of email supervision. One participant described being "frustrated" by not being able to explain the specific context of his/her work in order to maintain confidentiality and "being disappointed in the advice" as a consequence.

Time.

The comments related to time were mixed and should be considered in conjunction with the dislikes of the participants. For example half were not concerned about time and half expressed difficulties related to time. Of those who expressed concerns about time, most comments were related to the demands of responding to a case each week and preparing their own case for presentation. For example, one remarked "the hardest part was trying to find the time to devote to the project each week". Three commented that they would have preferred responding to cases on a fortnightly or monthly basis. None commented that waiting a week for feedback was a problem for them.

Supervision relationship with other group members.

Participants were asked to comment on what it was like being in a group with people they didn't know and whether a relationship developed between group members. Responses to this question were mixed with half of the participants (12) indicating that a relationship had developed between group members, others (9) indicating that no relationship had developed and the remaining three were unsure. Those who indicated that a relationship had developed noted that they were "beginning to identify the style of the other participants", "beginning to identify how each of the group members operated", and starting to "get a feel for each member". One commented that he/she "felt I was getting to the storming stage ... felt the group process starting to happen". Others commented on a "sense of group ownership/membership", "a real fondness to each and every member", "the empathy and

support of other group members”, and feeling “more in sympathy with some group members than others”. One remarked on the relationships being “all pretty superficial”. Those who did not think a relationship developed remarked that “there was not enough contact to feel I developed any sort of relationship”, not “really getting a sense of knowing the other members”, or believing “that we had time to develop relations with each other”. Others found positives in the anonymity and claimed that “the anonymity allowed me to open up”, and that “there was no danger of bias creeping in (to the feedback process)”.

Supervision facilitation.

Most of the participants (20) found the role of the facilitator helpful and effective. In particular they commented on appreciating “gentle reminders”, explanations of “the hitches along the way with technology hold-ups” and “being kept on track”. Some commented on appreciating the newsletters, the overall structure, and the overall timetable. Three participants made suggestions about the facilitation including one who would have appreciated the facilitator completing a proforma each week and one who would have liked to “have more discussion and develop the group process”.

Structured supervision process.

Most participants (17) commented favourably on the structure of the supervision process. They indicated that the structure was “manageable”, “kept us safe while working”, “let you have a fair go”, and “kept the process alive”. One participant suggested that the structure “ensured that everyone felt the need to keep up and not let the team down”. Five of the participants were not sure about the process including two who did not like it. Reasons cited by these participants included feeling “disconnected from my comments and the feedback from others” while another “found the time delay difficult”, and another “felt a little constrained by keeping to the response and presentation formats”.

The proformas.

All of the participants commented favourably on the proformas and in general found them helpful. In particular, participants commented that the proformas provided “a structure to work with that “enabled us to remain safe”, “helped each group member to work within the same boundaries”, and “allowed for consistent responses and presentation of cases”. Three participants indicated that they liked using the proformas in the first supervision round but that after that they would have liked more flexibility.

Suggestions about how email supervision could be done differently.

Two-thirds of the suggestions for conducting email supervision differently (15) related to time, structure and the use of a chat room format. Of those who suggested chat room style supervision (7), most did not know how it would work but thought it may result in “real time feedback”, “more immediate feedback”, or “a more conversational style of process”. In relation to time, three participants suggested that cases be presented either monthly or fortnightly instead of weekly.

Recommending email supervision to others.

Most of the participants (20) indicated that they would recommend email supervision to their colleagues including four who qualified their responses by saying that they would not recommend it over face-to face supervision. Reasons for recommending email supervision included that “the process is safe yet rigorous”, “it is convenient and objective”, and that “it is an excellent way to fill the supervision drought”. Other suggested that it would be useful to colleagues in remote or isolated locations as “you are not restricted to colleagues who are geographically close or by finding times that are mutually convenient”. Only one participant specifically would not recommend it to others citing that he/she needs “to know the person giving me advice to have any faith in it”.

Discussion

In general the findings of the present study indicate that the experience of peer group supervision conducted via email was beneficial and helpful for the participants. This is evidenced by the finding that all but one of the participants would recommend email supervision to their colleagues. Findings are consistent with previous studies of peer group supervision for school counsellors (Agnew, Vaught, Getz, & Fortune, 2000; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Crutchfield et al., 1997) and email supervision for counsellors (Myrick & Sabella, 1995).

As in previous studies of peer group supervision for school counsellors (Agnew, Vaught, Getz, & Fortune, 2000; Crutchfield & Borders, 1997; Crutchfield et al., 1997) one of the major benefits derived by the participants was support. Also consistent with previous studies, participants gained new ideas and strategies and an opportunity to gain new insight and perspectives (Crutchfield & Borders). There is evidence that peers can provide a rich supervisory environment for each other.

As with previous studies (Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Hart, Morris, & Betz, 1994; Wilbur, Roberts-Wilbur, Morris, Betz, & Hart, 1991) having a structured process was an advantage as all participants were able to present cases and receive feedback and productive work was done immediately the group began. A particular success of the structured process was the use of the proformas which all participants reported finding helpful. There is evidence that the participants felt safe in a supervisory environment where they all knew the structure and process. In addition the participants commented favorably on the role of the facilitator in the process and some of the success of the project could be attributed to the inclusion of a facilitator. This finding concurs with previous studies (Borders & Crutchfield, 1997; Crutchfield et al., 1997).

As with the study into email supervision conducted by Myrick and Sabella (1995), the present study identified more advantages than limitations. One of the main limitations identified by participants were issues related to time. Many participants found the project demanding in terms of the time involved in preparing their cases and responses and some disliked the time delay in receiving feedback to their cases. Despite the anonymity of participants in this project, approximately half sensed that a relationship was developing with other participants. A small number of participants found the anonymity advantageous. As

evidenced by this study, email supervision has the potential to overcome issues associated with geographic and professional isolation.

There is evidence in the present study that a lack of awareness of location specific factors as suggested by Sampson et al. (1997) may reduce the effectiveness of the process for some participants. However, it is possible that this difficulty may have been overcome if the process had not been anonymous and the participants were more able to reveal contextual information.

Although the findings of this study are favourable, the sample was small and the project was of a short-term nature, and any conclusions drawn must be considered tentative. However, it is suggested that email is an appropriate medium through which to conduct supervision for school counsellors and that structured peer group supervision can be conducted effectively through the use of email. Further it is suggested that all communication between group members be done through a supervisor/facilitator and that a structured process is useful for starting the supervision. It is also suggested that group members know who they are participating with in the supervision. The anonymity of the present study was for research purposes. Issues related to confidentiality need to be addressed from the beginning. In particular issues related to access to email addresses and the storage of hard copies of emails need to be attended to. Some participants may need technical support.

Future research studies on peer group supervision and supervision conducted by email for school counsellors are needed. For example, email supervision conducted over a longer period of time could be studied. Other mediums of supervision using technology such as the use of chat rooms also need further research. There is also scope for further studies that compare structured peer group supervision with unstructured peer group supervision processes.

The present study clearly indicates that email can be an effective mechanism for the conduct of supervision. Further a structured peer group supervision process can be effective in maximising the contribution of all group members and ensuring that the supervision process is safe and fair. The possibilities offered by technology in supervision remain under-used and under-researched. It is hoped that this study will stimulate further interest in the use of email for the supervision of school counsellors.

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