

Walking the Tightrope



‘Walking the Tightrope’

Using Power and authority in child welfare supervision

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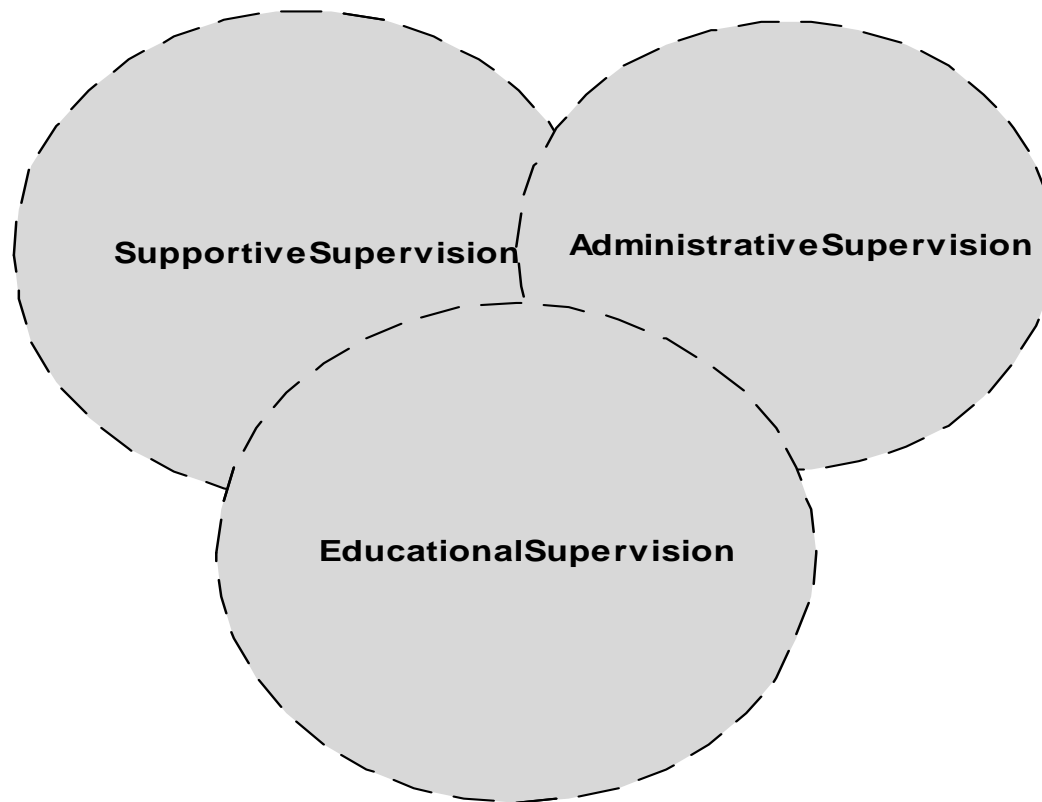
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Goal of Study...

- Illuminate our understanding of child welfare supervision, particularly as it relates to the negotiation of power and authority issues;
- Understand the integral components of child welfare supervision

Components of Supervision



Context

- Changing child welfare landscape
- Transformation Agenda and the desire to move towards more clinically focused practice
- Child welfare supervisors are seen as the catalyst for organizational change and practice initiatives

Desire to move away from the administratively focused aspects of supervision...



Literature Review

- Limited empirical research about child welfare supervision
- Studies related to job satisfaction, worker and retention and organizational outcomes underscore the need for effective child welfare supervision

Literature Review Continued...

- Workers' professional development needs are met through supervision as they (front-line staff members) acquire knowledge and skill;
- Supportive supervision is seen to empower workers.

Literature Review Continued...

- Findings of studies confirm the importance of the educational and supportive functions of supervision: Kadushin

Power and Authority Literature...

- Little is known about the way that power and authority is negotiated in child welfare supervisory practice;
- Kaiser & Barretta-Herman, 1999, describe a clinical supervision training program: program describes the tension of being a supportive supervisor and holding staff accountable for their actions.

Literature Review Continued...

- Faller and colleagues provided a supervisory training program. Content for this training program included:
 - Managing disagreements with workers
 - Managing relationships within the organization
 - Conflict management etc

Literature Review Continued...

- Some literature suggests, greater confidence=greater competence in negotiating power and authority issues;
- Heid suggests that supervisors use power “as needed for the benefit of supervisors and clients, but not to the detriment of supervisees or clients for personal need for control”(p.146).

Supervision Defined...

- *...A staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate the on-the-job performance of supervisees for whose work he or she is held accountable. In implementing this responsibility, the supervisor performs administrative, educational and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisee in the context of a positive relationship. The supervisor's ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service both quantitatively and qualitatively, in accordance with agency policies and procedures. (Kadushin, 1976, p.21; 2002, p. 23).*

Study Methodology

- Five focus groups in total: 51 supervisors
- Member checking uncovered the need to explore power and authority issues
- Conducted 3 more focus group session that examined power and authority in child welfare supervision
- Two groups held in urban agencies and one in a small rural agency in Ontario
- Sessions 2 hours in length
- Data analysis reviewed transcripts for recurring themes

Discussion Questions

- How do power and authority issues get played out in the context of your supervisory sessions?
- What role does organizational culture play in supervisors' capacity to negotiate power and authority issues?
- Where did you learn to negotiate power and authority issues when you were a front-line worker?

Transformation Agenda

- Supervisors pleased with new model of practice
- Concerned about how to negotiate the concept of strengths based practice and the mandate of protecting children
- ‘Don’t shoot the messenger’: supervisors seen as harbingers of change related to Transformation Agenda

Discussion Question...

- For those of you who are child welfare supervisors, how are you experiencing the transformation agenda?
- How is the Transformation Agenda impacting on your supervisory style?

Findings...



Multi-dimensional aspects of power and authority

Multi-dimensional and fluid that is dependent upon the following factors:

- Supervisors' conceptualization of power and authority when they were front-line practitioners;
- Developmental stage of supervisor
- Relationship with senior manager
- Organizational culture

Relationship Dynamics

- Competence and Trust of Front-line staff members
- Empowerment and sharing power
- Modeling and parallel process
- Transference and counter-transference
- Boundaries

Study Limitations

- Sample size too small to generalize: 13 supervisors explored power and authority issues from total sample of 51 supervisors
- Study took place in southwestern Ontario exclusively
- Perceptions of front-line workers and senior managers were excluded
- Exploratory research only: need for further research

Discussion

- Walking the tightrope: the underlying tensions of being a child welfare supervisor
- Supervisors did not view themselves as leaders of organizational change but conduits or harbingers of change
- Supervisors in original focus groups did not elaborate on the power and authority dynamics but when asked were very passionate about their issues related to topic

Discussion Continued...

- Supervisors in focus groups wished to continue their exploration of these issues in the context of peer supervision, and supervision with their managers
- Seen as a topic rarely discussed but foundational to their work
- Desire for reflective practice and need for structured time to reflect on professional development

Conclusion

- Space and place required to discuss these issues
- Consider implications at all levels of the organization