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Improving Field Supervision Through Collaborative Supervision Institutes

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Adequate and appropriate supervision of interns is frequently identified as a significant problem by training programs while, on their part, field placement sites often indicate that training programs generate expectations for interns that are not always “in synch” with district expectations of school psychologists (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). As a result of an increasing awareness of concerns voiced by students, supervisors, and trainers, several Massachusetts training programs and school districts collaborated in providing supervision institutes for practicum and intern supervisors in 2008 and 2009. These institutes were intended to foster cooperation, collaboration, and communication among stakeholders and to address the common issues that were identified as impediments to training.

The Massachusetts School Psychology Trainers (MA-SPT), which first convened in June 2007, comprises representatives from all school psychology training programs in Massachusetts. The group established the following initial goals:

- Fostering interuniversity collaboration in order to improve communication with one another and with the department of education about training issues specific to Massachusetts, and supporting newly developing programs
- Developing common standards regarding field placement and supervision and providing ongoing and sustainable professional development for field supervisors
- Developing more efficient and effective strategies regarding field work supervision
- Collaborating in the development of efficient and effective strategies to manage paperwork and data collection required for state and national accreditation and approval

To foster communication, we held regular meetings every 6 to 8 weeks, fostered ongoing dialog among the group via e-mail, and maintained close connections with the state school psychology organization. These regular communications served to provide clarifications, resolve academic calendar issues, and facilitate active dialogue about internship placement policies.

During these collaborative meetings, it became apparent that several issues were of similar concern across programs. One key issue was the need for continuing development of strong field training sites that would provide excellent supervision experiences for preservice school psychologists. Development of such sites

was recognized as a shared common goal that could be addressed through the provision of continuing professional development opportunities.

As the issues of providing professional development opportunities for supervisors and developing common standards in field work supervision rose to the forefront of the MA-SPT agenda, we recognized that we needed close collaboration with practitioners. Accordingly, we expanded the group to include representatives from several local suburban and urban school districts that reflected the range of sites in which programs typically place trainees. In the course of subsequent meetings, we identified significant issues for professional supervisory skills that would be well served by professional development opportunities. Many of these issues emanated from the gap between the knowledge and expectations of current students and training programs, and the customary practices and the knowledge and skills of their supervisors. Both trainers and practitioners were troubled by this gap and agreed that we should address this need in a format that was accessible and valuable for practitioners who were eager to be a part of the professional development of preservice school psychologists.

The Supervision Institutes

The traditional method of providing professional development in a 1-day lecture is generally ineffective, and it is difficult for practitioners to adopt suggestions culled through the frequently used strategies of self study and reading professional materials (Lam & Yuen, 2004). As Milne and colleagues (2003) indicate, professional development programs are most effective when learning is experiential, the training is closely aligned with objectives, barriers to implementing the newly learned skills are addressed, and skill generalization is planned and monitored. Activities should employ fundamental learning principles and enable the learner to assign personal meaning to the material. In addition to providing content, effective professional development activities employ participants' own executive functioning to develop metacognitive awareness of their own learning and learning methods.

Supervisors, both new and continuing, often acknowledge a lack of confidence in their ability to supervise because they feel unsure of how to best supervise graduate students in the field and/or because they feel that they lack current knowledge of changes in the field of school psychology. To better address these perceived needs, the idea of a summer institute was raised as a way to provide practical information for new as well as more seasoned supervisors during a time that would encourage attendance. In addition, the topics presented would both validate their knowledge base in school psychology and also illuminate areas where supervisors needed to continue to develop their own skills through professional development. Such institutes tend to be energizing, create a desire to put new skills into practice, and encourage practitioners to seek additional professional opportunities to enhance their skills.

To maximally promote participation, we hold supervision institutes immediately after the public school year ends in June. Because the speakers volunteered their time, the workshops were provided at the extremely low cost of \$25 per day (for 3 days in 2008 and 2 days in 2009). This fee included continuing education credits for 5 to 7 professional development hours per day, lunches and snacks, and during the first year, a copy of *Professional Development and Supervision of School Psychologists* (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008),

which served as the textbook for the institute. To permit such a low cost, participating school districts (Boston and Newton) and training programs (University of Massachusetts Boston, Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, Tufts University, Northeastern University, Worcester State College, and University of Massachusetts Amherst) donated space, money, or in-kind work. In addition, we each donated our time as lecturers and facilitators throughout the institutes. The Massachusetts School Psychologists Association also cosponsored the institutes and served as the continuing education credit provider and financial unit.

The institutes were very well attended: in 2008, by 58 current and prospective supervisors of school psychology interns and practicum students, and in 2009, by 43 individuals (18 of whom had also attended in 2008). Learning objectives of the supervision institutes in 2008 and 2009 had much in common, although the content of the 2009 institute reflected feedback following the 2008 institute. General learning objectives were to:

- Identify challenges and related strategies associated with supervision of school psychologists
- Identify the stages of professional development and the type of supervision needed for each
- Apply NASP's *Principles for Professional Ethics* to supervision practice, demonstrate the use of ethical decision-making, and utilize methods that guide the ethical practice of supervision
- Discuss supervising evidence-based practices through application of general assessment principles
- Identify key methods to provide feedback to supervisees
- Develop increased awareness of multicultural issues in supervision
- Develop techniques in supervising consultation

To foster learning and the application of learning by participants, a variety of professional development methods were used, including panel discussions; didactic lectures supplemented by questions and discussion; simulated case study presentations; role-plays and demonstrations; reading assignments; and small-group activities involving exchange of ideas and experiences, collaborative problem solving, and collaborative goal setting.

The presenters arranged the learning environment to focus on community building and helping participants get to know one another. Each day, participants were assigned to different groups. Tables of six to eight also were used as small discussion groups. Also each day, participants completed a daily feedback form consisting of a blank sheet of paper on which they listed what had worked well, what did not work, and topics in need of further clarification. Presenters met daily before each session to review plans for the day and at the end of the day to process the session, review the daily feedback forms, and modify the next day's presentations. A spirit of community was quickly established with participants openly addressing issues and concerns both during discussion and through the use of the feedback forms. During final sessions, participants grouped according to school district and/or geographic region and discussed "future directions" for professional development and peer support.

Evaluation

Guiding principles of the supervision institutes were to help participants develop a reflective, purposeful approach to supervision; to provide them with information regarding current training program content and information about best practices; to highlight the value of ongoing professional development; and to foster

the development of supportive groups.

According to evaluations of the supervision institutes, our collaborative approach was highly successful. Participants indicated that they valued the instruction, materials, and content. In response to 28 (in 2008) and 29 (in 2009) questions, on a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = poor to 6 = excellent) no item was rated at less than 3.9. The 2008 mean response was 4.6 (SD = .16) and the 2009 mean response was 4.5 (SD = .3). Participants indicated that they gained significantly as practitioners, having attained greatly increased confidence in their ability to employ evidence-based and best practices according to professional standards. The major strengths of the supervision institutes were knowledgeable presenters who were engaging, personable, enthusiastic, articulate, sensitive, and well-organized and who focused on relevant, practical topics. The relative weakness was not enough time to cover the material attempted and frustration at not being able to attend every session when multiple sessions were scheduled. In response to an open-response item, participants recommended quarterly, regional supervision meetings and an annual supervision institute.

Following the 2008 supervision institute, the members of the Massachusetts School Psychology Trainer's group conducted an online survey to determine interest in future institutes, peer supervision groups, and topics. Of the 91 survey respondents, 60% (53) had not attended the supervision institute, and 40% (38) had done so. In terms of the preferred frequency of regional peer supervision of supervisors meetings, the largest number (40, 45%) expressed interest in meeting once a semester, followed by monthly (19, 22%), and yearly (16, 18%). Respondents were primarily interested in attending supervision training in June just after school is out (45, 51%). However, there was also interest in sessions on Saturdays during the school year (21, 24%) and during after-school hours (29, 33%). Preferred topics for future supervision institutes were supervising evidence-based practice (36, 41%), supervising social/emotional and behavioral assessment and intervention (35, 40%), supervising consultation (27, 31%), supervising psychoeducational assessment (25, 28%), systems change and leadership (20, 23%), interpersonal relationships in supervision (19, 22%), and multicultural supervision issues (11, 13%). Some respondents (25%) expressed interest in mentoring other supervisors. Considerable interest was expressed in having a university trainer attending regional peer supervisor meetings (43, 49%) in order to facilitate the meetings and convey university expectations.

Outcomes

Outcomes of the initial supervision institute included increased collaboration among universities, increased collaboration between universities and school districts, ongoing supervision support groups in larger districts, cross-district supervision support groups, and a second supervision institute a year later. Additionally, participants developed insight into their own professional development needs. Additional outcomes include increased collaboration around procedural issues such as coordination of dates for seeking field placements.

Increased collaboration among universities. One of the most valued outcomes was increased collaboration among universities. Previously, the Commonwealth training programs had functioned from an

individualistic model and there was minimal sharing of information or resources among programs. This individualistic model resulted in student anxiety and feelings of stress regarding internship placement and other professional opportunities. The establishment of the trainers organization (MA-SPT) and the collaborative provision of the annual supervision institute have enabled the trainers to develop a collective orientation that fosters information sharing, coordination of dates for seeking field placements and applicant interviews, and a problem-solving orientation regarding our common challenges. This collaboration has had a significant, positive impact on students, field sites, and faculty trainers.

Increased collaboration between universities and school districts. One of the outcomes of the supervision institute was increased collaboration between universities and school systems to provide continued professional development. For example, as a result of the supervision institute, Andria Amador, assistant director of psychological services for the Boston Public Schools, and Diana Finer, Tufts University faculty member, collaborated in providing professional development opportunities to Boston Public School supervisors. Twenty Boston supervisors attended the 2008 supervision institute, and during the following year the director of psychological services, Andria Amador, worked with district school psychology supervisors to identify areas of need and define goals. The school psychologists in the district meet monthly to discuss supervision issues, and Diana Finer has joined them every couple of months to discuss topics relevant to supervision.

In the Newton Public Schools, David Gotthelf and his staff have undertaken changes in psychology and mental health staff and policies. These have included the reassessment of best professional practices with interns, the reassessment of best practices with each other as professionals within the system, a review of professional development needs, and establishment of a formal and regular in-house professional development structure. It should be noted, however, that at times the Newton Public Schools have had to reconcile their good intentions with reality. Encountered problems have included time limitations, the geographic challenges of getting people together in a large system, and the challenge of prioritizing system needs versus building needs for building-based psychologists. Budget limitations pose additional challenges, in that staff reductions may further limit time for professional development and supervision. These limitations have, however, resulted in a greater awareness by psychologists as well as other mental health professionals in the system about how to work together in order to provide the administration with a data-based understanding of student mental health needs, the services provided, and potential additional services. Identifying the important role of school psychology interns in providing services has led to an increased appreciation of the need for excellent supervision and the desirability of providing financial compensation for the interns.

Increased collaboration in the provision of professional development for school psychologists. Another result of the regular and ongoing collaboration between universities and school districts has been increased collaboration in the provision of professional development opportunities for school psychologists. For example, faculty from the University of Massachusetts Boston have provided a series of workshops regarding RTI for Boston Public School psychologists, and faculty from Tufts University provided an inservice workshop on risk assessment screening for school psychologists in the Newton Public Schools. In

addition, supervising school psychologists from different districts are planning joint inservice workshops for the school psychologists on their staffs.

Ongoing professional support for supervision. In the Boston Public Schools, supervisors have collaborated to standardize procedures. For example, they developed a standard, system-wide letter to inform parents of the intern's role when working with students. They also collaborate with university partners regarding the development of support for supervisors in order to improve the quality of supervision to interns and practicum students.

Cross-district supervision support groups. Smaller school systems that do not have enough supervisors to form a group can form a group with adjacent towns, pairing urban and urban rim communities, or urban and suburban and/or rural communities. While community issues might vary, the basic issues of supervision are the same. This type of collaboration was piloted by Tufts University in communities northwest of Boston, where Diana Finer facilitated group meetings of nine supervisors from two urban and one urban rim community. This collaboration took the form of supervisors supporting each other with the more experienced mentoring the less experienced. Having a university facilitator provided the opportunity for supervisors to ask questions about university assignments and to address problems regarding supervising graduate students. Group membership facilitated relationships among the supervisors and the university, providing a comfortable venue to address issues and get to know supervisors in a less formal setting. Collaboration between universities and school systems contributes to best practice learning for graduate students.

Additional benefits of the supervision institute to participants were the reemphasis on use of best practices in daily work, a reawakening of professionalism, and a realization of their own professional development needs. Not to be overlooked was the dynamic that has developed among the institute's planners. The collegiality resulting from the planning meetings was and has been a major factor not only in the success of the institutes but in the resulting school-based programs as well. There was indeed a creative power in the planner's collaboration (Sawyer, 2007) as new ideas emerged and were shared across programs.

Conclusion

The authors observe that several components contributed to the positive outcomes of the supervision institutes. The first essential element was the development of an ongoing trainers group that includes multiple universities and school districts that (a) meets and communicates regularly, (b) identifies and addresses areas of common concern, and (c) fosters collaborative problem solving, a generous sharing of information and resources, and abandons territoriality and competition. The second essential element was the provision of extremely affordable, accessible, and responsive workshops that use multiple teaching methods, pre- and posttests, end-of-the-meeting evaluations, and postworkshop follow-up meetings, surveys, and collaboration. These strategies make them more than "forgotten workshops"!

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