

## Opportunities for development

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# **Opportunities for development: the practice of supervision in early years provision in England**

## **Abstract**

This article examines how the practice of supervision has developed within a range of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision in a county in Central England in the United Kingdom. Supervision has been recently introduced as a mandatory requirement for ECEC in England in 2012, and there is limited research looking at the impact of this. The research aimed to examine how supervision is being implemented by ECEC providers. It employed a mixed methods research design including a questionnaire (n=38) and three subsequent telephone interviews, and draws out key themes on who is accessing supervision, the level of frequency, the purposes, challenges and enablers of supervision. It highlights the tendency of the managerial function of supervision including safeguarding of children to dominate, and the potential for supervision as a reflective space and as support for staff including managers and leaders to be overlooked.

**Key words:** supervision, early childhood, early years, purposes of supervision

## **Introduction**

This article seeks to examine how the practice of supervision has developed within a range of early childhood education and care provision in a county in Central England in the United Kingdom. Supervision has been recently introduced as a mandatory requirement to early childhood education and care (ECEC) in 2012, whereas it has a longer history within professions such as health, social care and other helping professions. This means that the purposes and functions of supervision may not be universally understood or accepted by all

those working in early childhood settings, and whilst there is potential for supervision to develop practice, it can also cause confusion.

The article begins with a brief overview of supervision, and how it is defined within differing professions, and then considers the purposes and functions of supervision. It explores both how supervision is positioned within English government guidance, policy and relevant literature on the use of supervision, for those working within early childhood education and care. This sets the scene for the current research gaining the views of those engaged in supervision in early years contexts. The article concludes by discussing how the research relates to the policy and literature and potential ways to develop supervision in the coming years.

### ***Definitions of Supervision***

Supervision is a word with different meanings dependent on the context, and therefore there can be confusion about how supervision is enacted. Scaife (2001) notes supervision holds different meanings between individuals, and describes it as;

‘...what happens when people who work in the helping professions make a formal arrangement to think with another or others about their work with a view to providing the best possible service to clients and enhancing their own personal and professional development.’ (Scaife, 2001, p.4)

Scaife (2001) highlights that since professional helping is carried out in many different disciplines such as applied psychology, counselling, psychiatry, nursing, social and therapeutic roles, in turn supervision can be positioned differently. However, within these

professions, the common purpose for supervision is as a supportive and reflective space for workers. Scaife (2001) draws out the key features that characterise supervision highlighting it is supervisee focused, centres on the welfare of the clients, should preclude the existence of other role relationships between the participants and be characterised by an agreement or contract. SCIE (2013) highlight that the ultimate goal of supervision is to improve services for the people who use the service, so within ECEC, this would include children and families.

Whilst supervision has a long standing history within Head Start early childhood programmes in the United States (Yonemura, 1968; Hatch, 1969), there is more recent literature on supervision and early childhood. This tends to focus on the supervision of students on practice in early childhood settings (Dayan, 2008; Jensen, 2015), those entering the profession (Clifford et al, 2005), and to support those working with children displaying behaviour difficulties (Strain & Joseph, 2004) and includes models of supervision (Gradovski & Løkken, 2015).

Hawkins and Shohet (2006) link the growth of interest in supervision in recent years to the growth in use of counselling and therapeutic approaches by those in the helping professions. They place this alongside an increased acceptance by most people that there is a need for some form of professional help or support at some point in their lives thus leading to a greater awareness of supervision as a supportive aspect of helping and caring for others. However supervision can also be viewed as a way of ensuring activities are undertaken correctly or safely, with synonyms related to power, accountability and control, placing supervision squarely within a traditional management role. For these reasons, it is understandable there may be confusion for those unaccustomed to the potential and positive impact of supervision in ECEC.

### *The functions of supervision*

As the definitions of supervision vary, in turn the primary goals or functions of supervision can differ, although all centrally focus on supporting the work of the supervisee.

Kadushin (1976) highlight three main functions to supervision:

- Educative – developing the skills, abilities and understanding of the supervisee
- Supportive – responding to the emotional demands of the supervisee’s work
- Managerial - offers quality assurance to the practices of the supervisee

Whilst the previous English Government guidance on safeguarding (DfE, 2010) for those working with children drew explicitly on models of supervision (Morrisson, 2005; Skills for Care & CWDC, 2007) and placed a strong emphasis on accountability and the managerial function of supervision, more recent guidance on safeguarding (DfE, 2015) has a reduced emphasis on supervision, and focuses on the role of supervision social workers.

In comparison, the educative and supportive functions of supervision, are viewed as essential in reports on effective supervision (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), 2013), literature on supervision from mental health (Scaife, 2001), and the wider helping professions (Hawkins and Shohet, 2007). The educative function relates to developing the skills, understanding and capacities of the supervisee (Hawkins and Shohet, 2006). The supportive function is where the supervisee can be supported to process and understand emotions and reactions they may feel as a result of their work. These functions are also included within the guidance from the DfE (2010) but are seen as additional and subsidiary functions, in comparison to the central role of accountability and the managerial function. In

comparison, Hawkins and Shohet (2006) advocate an integrated approach, and suggest that combining the multiple functions is at the heart of good supervision. SCIE (2013) also take an integrated perspective and highlight the centrality of the supervisory relationship and that an effective supervisor is;

‘...one who is able to provide the emotional and practical support that their supervisees need while at the same time keeping a firm eye on the standard of care being received by people who use services.’ (p.42)

At this juncture, it is helpful to consider where the policy documents from the English Government place their focus in terms of the primary functions of supervision.

### ***The place of supervision in Government guidance for early years provision***

Overall, the range of current Government guidance for practitioners working within ECEC in England presents a perplexing picture. Some of the current documents and guidance highlight a role for supervision, whereas it is omitted in others. Supervision does not have a long history in ECEC in England, indeed Tickell (2011a; 2011b) first introduced the term supervision in the independent review of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2011, just one year before it became statutory in 2012.

Tickell (2011b) noted that previous statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008) did not specifically mention supervision. She highlighted the potential confusion around supervision as it could mean different things to different practitioners; the act of looking after and caring for children, training, continuing professional development, or a mechanism for practitioners to raise concerns and seek support.

Tickell (2011a) clearly stated her own understanding of supervision seeing it as a leadership responsibility, ‘...intrinsic to effective leadership and management practice...’ (p. 47) and a key part of systems to support all staff working in early years settings. She viewed supervision as an opportunity to develop reflective practice rather than simply a way of managers checking on practitioners. She recommended that the term supervision needed to be clarified in the new Early Years Foundation Stage in 2012, but that settings retain autonomy on how to develop their own procedures within supervision. She emphasised that this should include childminders, and consideration should be given to how peer networks can be utilised to promote horizontal forms of supervision. In comparison, the **DfE (2015) safeguarding guidance focuses on supervision for social workers working with their managers, and therefore** unlike Tickell’s horizontal approaches to supervision, promotes vertical, managerial forms of supervision. This is where supervisors are positioned as a source of advice and expertise to practitioners.

The Wave Trust/DfE (2013) guidance for those working with children from birth to two years emphasised the ability to engage in supervision and professional reflection as part of the core skills needed by the workforce. It identifies the quality of settings is dependent on the staff working within them, and this in turn relates to the training, supervision and development support available to staff. The Wave Trust/DfE (2013) highlights the supportive function on supervision, stating that practitioners should access supervision that; ‘...supports them in dealing with the emotionally demanding aspects of their work and building positive, non-judgemental relationships with families’ (p. 7).

The importance of effective supervision is re-visited a number of times in the document, **which draws on similar models and approaches to SCIE (2013)**. It goes beyond a model of accountability, to include the need for reflection, problem-solving and time to explore the thoughts and reactions of the practitioner in relation to their work with young children, their parents, families and other professionals.

In contrast, three key documents do not discuss supervision. These include the Nutbrown Review (2012) of early education and childcare qualifications, the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) (2010) list of the common core of skills and knowledge needed by the Children's Workforce and the DfE/DoH (2011) document which set out the Government's plans for those who work with young children and their families.

Supervision was introduced as statutory within the welfare and safeguarding requirements of the EYFS in 2012, and has remained unchanged in subsequent versions. It is included as shown below;

'Providers must put appropriate arrangements in place for the supervision of staff who have contact with children and families. Effective supervision provides support, coaching and training for the practitioner and promotes the interests of children. Supervision should foster a culture of mutual support, teamwork and continuous improvement, which encourages the confidential discussion of sensitive issues.

Supervision should provide opportunities for staff to:

- discuss any issues – particularly concerning children's development or well-being;
- identify solutions to address issues as they arise; and
- receive coaching to improve their personal effectiveness.' (DfE, 2014, p.20)

This promotes a child-centred approach to supervision and reflects the three most frequently cited functions of supervision (Kashudan, 1976); educative, supportive and managerial. Problem solving is identified explicitly and can be seen to aligned with reflection and the educative function of supervision. Importantly this description of supervision adds a focus on safeguarding and prioritises it as it is the first bullet point. It also views supervision as enabling team working.

As the regulatory body for childcare in England, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) play a key role in the implementation of Government policies. The Ofsted handbook for inspecting early years and childcare provision (Ofsted, 2015) includes supervision but the term supervision is used both for supervision of children and for supervision of staff. Supervision of staff is covered within the section of the inspection on effectiveness of leadership and management and is considered important to support staff development, teaching, learning and practice and is placed alongside performance management within the grade descriptors. As with the safeguarding guidance (DfE, 2010), Ofsted implicitly highlight the managerial function of supervision, and place it as part of the systems that managers deliver to staff, focusing on vertical supervision, rather than an aspect of good practice for all staff.

In conclusion, whilst the role of supervision is identified as statutory in the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2012, key documents used by early childhood practitioners in England present a confusing picture. At times supervision is omitted, and when the term is used, it is in different ways and with diverse meanings. For instance, whilst it is seen as a key role for leaders and managers by Tickell (2011a), DfE (2010) and latterly Ofsted (2015),

within inspections, the dominant function of supervision may be perceived as managerial as it is allied to performance management and accountability. In comparison, the Wave Trust/DfE (2013) emphasise the supportive and educative functions of supervision, highlighting the value of reflection and problem solving in relation to the emotional content of work with young children.

### *Literature on supervision in ECEC*

Relevant literature was identified through undertaking a search using the terms supervision, mentoring, early childhood and early years. Whilst supervision within early childhood care and education is a relatively new concept in England, the idea of reflective practice has been used within teacher education for many years since the work of Dewey (1933). Indeed Tickell (2011b) highlights the potential of supervision to promote reflective practice. Seminal work by Schon (1982, 1987) identified three types of reflection; reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-for-action, therefore reflection at the time, after the event, and lastly as a guide for future action. Supervision is intended to create opportunities for reflection on action and for action.

Bayat (2010) highlights that many teacher educators in the United States have adopted the goal of enabling students to reflect. Howes et al (2003) identify the key role that supervision plays in promoting effective teaching in early childhood programmes in the US, and position this as equally important to gaining higher levels of qualification for those who work within childcare. Bayat (2010) draws on the work of Davis (2003, 2006) who identified the difference between productive and unproductive reflection where reflection moves from descriptive (unproductive) to analytical (productive) and identifies video technology as a useful tool to help move reflection within supervision in this direction. Fukkink and Lont

(2007) conducted a meta-analysis and review of caregiver training, and view supervision within childcare as a form of informal training. It formed an element of many of the training courses evaluated with some including videotaped practice sessions, to enable individualized and practice-oriented feedback. This highlights the role of supervision for those joining the ECEC.

Mathers et al (2014) identify that ‘...on-the-job supervision...’ (p. 23) within practitioner training and qualifications as key for raising the quality for children under three, alongside other factors such as the general educational level of the practitioner, specialised early years training and continuing professional development. Indeed Whitebook et al (2009) suggest that one-off training events are less effective, and emphasise the value of on-going mentoring and opportunities for reflection on practice. Mathers et al (2014) recommend further research is conducted on the specific features of supervision and support which are most effective in preparing practitioners to work with babies and toddlers. Similarly Barnett (2011) highlights that not all early intervention programmes are equally effective, and that it is important to identify the key conditions, including the time spent on supervision and coaching of staff, needed to achieve positive outcomes for children in relation to their cognitive, social and emotional development, progress in school, and long term behaviour as adults.

Supervision is identified within the literature as an approach that is helpful when practitioners within **ECEC** come under pressure particularly in relation to children’s behaviour. Strain and Joseph (2004) emphasise the value of supervision for early childhood practitioners when working with young children with challenging behaviour. They highlight the potential for supervision to help practitioners acknowledge their strong feelings towards

the child and the situation, utilise problem solving approaches and identify potential training needs using self-assessment tools within supervision. John (2012a) explored the idea of 'emotional contagion' (p.33) relating to the emotional impact of working with families and young children, and the need for supervision. Carlson et al (2009) also identified ongoing reflective supervision as essential for Child Care Expulsion Prevention Program (CCEP) consultants to deliver effective support to both providers and parents. McAllister and Thomas (2007) develop this idea further within Early Head Start (EHS) through discussion of 'parallel supervision' (p.204) whereby the supervisory relationship between the supervisor and home visitor models the relationship with the home visitor and the parent. This is noted to help the home visitor take multiple perspectives and to reflect on their contribution to the interaction so they can support parents to reflect on their emotions and reactions.

With a focus on child protection and safeguarding, Wonnacott (2013) compared incidents from two serious case reviews and identified the potential role supervision could play within nurseries. She suggests that supervision is one arena where staff anxieties about whistle-blowing can be addressed and that management can become more aware of what is occurring within the organisation which will in turn increase safe practice when working with children.

John (2008) highlights the relationship between mentoring and supervision, and the importance of the supportive function of supervision in terms of reflecting on how work with families affects the professionals working in Children's Centres. In addition she emphasises the potential within the educative function of supervision, in that it can also be a good opportunity to consider ways of thinking about and working more effectively with families. Others such as Nimmo and Park (2009) have also used mentoring to develop the research

identity of early childhood teachers. John (2008) highlights a number of key themes in her three sessions of mentoring of participants on the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) programme which related to leaders feeling unsupported, uncomfortable and lonely in their roles, and how mentoring enabled them to feel more confident and comfortable.

It is important to recognise that whilst some may view supervision as positive, there are difficulties. For example, McAllister and Thomas (2007) highlight reflective supervision was not easy for staff to undertake as some found it difficult to talk about their feelings, and other sought feedback on an ongoing basis. At a pragmatic level, there were also difficulties around having sufficient time.

Although there is a limited amount of literature published within peer reviewed journals, authors such as John (2012) have written short accessible articles to support and enable the workforce within early children education and care to deliver supervision including the functions of supervision, supervisor and supervisee responsibilities (John, 2012b), team supervision (John, 2012c) and supervision policies and practice (John, 2012d). More recent publications such as Page, Clare and Nutbrown (2013) discuss the value of supervision to support the Key Person approach (Elfer et al, 2012). They draw on Elfer and Dearnley (2007) as a potential model of supervision where early years professionals can reflect on the emotional issues associated with care giving and 'professional love' (Page, 2011) for young children and their families.

The literature on supervision in ECEC highlights it has generally been provided to students and those new to the profession. However there have been more recent

developments encouraging the use of supervision with those staff working with the youngest children (Mathers et al, 2014), to support staff with children's behaviour (Strain and Joseph, 2004) and for leaders (Johns, 2008). The policy guidance in England and the literature emphasise different functions for supervision; accountability, emotional support for staff, child protection and safeguarding, reflection and continuing professional development and it is unclear which function is the most important or how these functions can be integrated. In addition there is very little research on supervision in ECEC in England since the introduction of it as a statutory duty in 2012, and this was the rationale for the following research.

### **Current research**

I was commissioned by a Local Authority in Central England to deliver twilight training sessions on supervision in 2015, and this presented an opportunity to examine the implementation of supervision by the ECEC practitioners who attended the training through questionnaires and subsequent telephone interviews. The questionnaire examined who was accessing supervision, the frequency and the purposes for which it was valued. These purposes were drawn from the literature and policy guidance and included professional development, emotional support, safeguarding, accountability, problem solving and overall.

### ***Research design***

The research explored the implementation of supervision within ECEC in England since the advent of supervision as a mandatory requirement of the EYFS (DfE, 2012) through a survey of practitioner views using mixed methods. This drew on a critical realist methodology (Robson, 2002) as it sought to explain how supervision is implemented within the real world. The methods employed were a questionnaire and a subsequent telephone interview to illuminate answers given based on the analysis of the questionnaires.

### ***Research aims***

Those who attended the training were asked to complete a short one page questionnaire, prior to the training, which was intended to answer the following research questions;

1. Who is getting supervision in early years provision?
2. How frequently is supervision given?
3. Which purposes are valued within this supervision?

This was followed up by a telephone interview with participants who were willing to participate further in the research. This focused on the following research question:

4. What are the challenges of and enablers for supervision within early years?

### ***Participants***

The questionnaire was completed by 38 practitioners, predominantly managers, owners and senior staff, from a range of private, voluntary, independent and maintained sector early years provision, within a two month period in June and July 2015. These practitioners had voluntarily elected to attend the training, and were therefore interested in the topic of supervision, forming a purposive sample. This is a limitation to the research alongside issues in using questionnaires such as limited responses, accuracy and honesty (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). For these reasons, the questionnaires were followed up by telephone interviews with the three participants, all managers, who agreed to share contact details and to give further information related to the research questions. The data from the questionnaires was used to form the basis of the interview questions and to gain qualitative data to further illuminate how supervision was implemented in ECEC settings. Telephone interviews also have limitations due to an absence of non-verbal cues, so short questions were used and answers were checked at the end of the interview.

Ethical issues (BPS, 2009; EECERA, 2014) were considered through discussion with the commissioner, and voluntary, informed consent was gained from participants to use the data in the questionnaires in this research. The participants completed them anonymously and collected prior to the training, and details only shared from those willing to engage in a telephone interview. They were reminded that this was confidential and to scope the current provision of supervision. This alongside the questionnaires not being referred to within the training session represented an attempt to reduce the power imbalance, prevent participants completing socially desirable answers or feeling under any pressure. This too forms a key limitation to the research.

## Results

### *Who is getting supervision in early years provision?*

This section presents the results gained from the questionnaires (n=38)

Table 1 showing whether staff receives supervision in early years provision

Insert here

Figure 1 showing which staff receive supervision in early years provision

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Table 1 highlights virtually all settings within the sample surveyed are aware of the need for staff to have supervision as indicated in the EYFS (DfE, 2012). Figure 1 highlights that all settings are clear that staff who work with children should be getting supervision, however there were a small proportion of managers, deputy managers and room leaders who are not

receiving supervision and a small number of staff with no contact with children receiving supervision. This indicated some confusion about who needed supervision and the purposes of it. This may reflect different understandings of supervision as this was not defined within the questionnaire, and may also indicate supervision may differ depending on who was accessing it.

### *How frequently is supervision given?*

There was much variance in the frequency of supervision reported, with approximately a quarter reporting it was termly or three times a year, and a half reporting it varied or giving no answer. When patterns of variance were reported, there was no distinguishable pattern.

These widely varying responses highlight that there is extensive variation in the frequency of supervision for these practitioners working within early years, with the most common response being a termly or half termly pattern.

Figure 2 showing the average frequency of supervision received by staff

### *Which purposes are valued within this supervision?*

Figures 3 showing the value of supervision for staff based on functions of supervision

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Figure 4 showing participants' views of the overall value of supervision

Figures 3 and 4 highlight that safeguarding children was seen as the primary purpose for supervision, although it is interesting to note this is closely followed by emotional support for staff and professional development. Over half of those who completed the questionnaire identified supervision as well worth the time, although it is interesting to note that about a quarter chose not to respond which could indicate some ambivalence towards undertaking and engaging in supervision.

Some general comments on supervision were mentioned in the reflections on supervision box at the end of the questionnaire. This included comments that supervision was helpful as it;

‘Nips any issues in the bud before becoming bigger issues.’

‘Feel it is very important as it strengthens the relationship between staff.’

These comments both indicate an additional function for supervision related to staff cohesion and co-operation. There was also some confusion on the role of supervision in terms of accountability through performance management which was added by one respondent.

‘It happens daily by room leaders and other practitioners but we annually assess and reflect through appraisals.’

***What are the challenges of and enablers for supervision within early years including managers?***

The questionnaires also identified challenges to supervision in the final comments box including;

‘Some staff don’t value it and are intimidated’

‘Time consuming and hard to fit in’

After analysing the questionnaires, and undertaking the training, discussion within the sessions and responses indicated there were barriers to supervision for staff and also some uncertainty around managers and room leaders themselves accessing and providing supervision. Since all three participants who offered to respond were managers of their settings, it was agreed with the commissioner of the training that the telephone interview would focus on barriers and enablers to supervision for all staff and then more specifically for

managers. It is important to note that the telephone interviews were conducted by myself who led the training and this is likely to have impacted on the answers given.

All three managers who engaged in a telephone interview identified time as the main barrier to supervision, emphasising the impact of supervision regarding having sufficient staff available for the children, the need to maintain the correct ratios of adults to children, and the related cost implications. In terms of what enabled supervision, time again came up as a key issue, with one setting trialling having a set afternoon for supervision, another using time after the setting had closed, and the final booking supervision slots in ahead. Other enablers included being prepared, having a suitable form and a robust agenda for supervision.

Whilst all three indicated that supervision for managers was needed and important, all noted potential difficulties. One indicated manager supervision was difficult to organise due to the hierarchy within the setting, whilst others had set up informal arrangements with other managers but deemed this as peer support rather than supervision. One manager raised the possibility of the local authority adviser taking on this role but doubted his/her capacity. Two of the three also raised the issue of having someone suitable to undertake supervision with them as manager was problematic, as it was not seen to be feasible for staff working within the setting, alongside the need for an open and trusting relationship with someone of equivalent status with a similar role.

## **Discussion**

Whilst this research only gives a snapshot of a small number of settings in one area of England, it indicates that supervision has been unanimously adopted by practitioners working with children within the early years settings although there is much variation in frequency,

with most identifying once or twice every three months. This is to be as anticipated as supervision became a statutory requirement within the EYFS (DfE, 2012) and those who were completing the questionnaire were attending training on the issue of supervision.

Whilst there was agreement that all practitioners working with children receive supervision, there was variation within this, with some mixed responses for managers, volunteers, administrative and domestic staff. The fact that everyone identified that practitioners working with children receive supervision, but then the mixed picture for staff within the settings themselves indicates some potential misunderstanding about the purposes of supervision with safeguarding of children seen as the primary function. This is supported by 94% identifying safeguarding children as making supervision worth the time, at least occasionally, and this purpose was endorsed by 76% as well worth the time. This could reflect that the DfE (2012) placed discussion of issues particularly concerning children's development or well-being first within the guidance given in the EYFS. This may also reflect that supervision has been interpreted from a social work perspective and as Wonnacott (2013) suggested is seen as clear way to improve safe practice in nurseries. The other functions of supervision are recognised, but there were comments on the form that indicated for some supervision was either conducted through daily informal discussion or was a form of appraisal.

Indeed after emotional support, checking progress against tasks which is linked to accountability was seen as a primary function with the highest combined percentage (92%) for seeing this made supervision well worth or sometimes worth the time. This is aligned to the managerial function of supervision.

Conversely, it is interesting to note that there was variation in whether the managers and leaders of these provisions also receive supervision, as this too should relate to the promotion of safe practice beyond the individual staff member to also consider how the systems work. Indeed Tickell (2011) saw supervision as a responsibility within effective leadership and that was needed for all staff, including the managers. The telephone interviews indicated that the difficulties with supervision for leaders and managers related to pragmatic reasons such as time, and the availability of others suitable to do this role as it is deemed as needing someone equivalent in status or senior. One manager stated;

‘...ideally it would be someone with experience of management of a setting who has time to come in and who the manager can have an open and trusted relationship with.’ (Manager of a term time private setting)

This relates to John (2008) who indicates that leaders within Children’s Centre may feel unsupported and isolated in their roles and that mentoring programmes within NPQICL had been helpful to enable and reduce these feelings. It is interesting to note that whereas supervision is perceived as essential for staff, it is seen as an indulgence for managers with one manager stating;

‘...Although it would be helpful, it is not essential and I can manage without it, so it feels like a luxury.’ (Manager of a private day nursery)

This may relate to the focus on the managerial functions of supervision within Ofsted (2015) and other guidance by the DfE (2012). The participants who completed the questionnaire appeared to perceive of supervision as essential or certainly more important for those who

work within the setting with children, rather than those who lead and manage the provision. This in turn privileges vertical forms of supervision in line with Ofsted (2015) who place supervision as within leadership and management and therefore as an act done by the manager to those working within the setting rather than as a support mechanism for all who work within it. This would appear to miss a clear opportunity for supervision with managers where it would be possible to consider the system itself and the provision as a whole. Georgeson (2015) suggests that supervision, alongside recruitment and induction, is part of helping leaders become sustainable in their use of human resources. She identifies these processes give leaders and managers opportunities to make best use of the practitioner's individual interests and strengths, and support them to maintain a healthy work-life balance and prevent burnout. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) also highlight the importance of supervision for preventing staff burnout and fatigue, as supervision is the equivalent of work time for coal miners to wash off the grime and coal dust of the day.

Within this research, supervision appears positively adopted and valued by those who completed the questionnaire, however it is important to note that these were practitioners who were on a course on supervision and are likely to hold positive views and may well not be representative of others. It also reflects that supervision has been identified as mandatory for staff within early years and forms part of the inspection process. It is noteworthy that problem solving was identified as least useful within supervision, and this could be seen as most closely allied with the reflective aspect or the supportive function of supervision. This may reflect McAllister and Thomas's (2007) finding that reflective supervision was not easy for staff to undertake. However this has to be taken alongside the perception from managers that supervision is seen as emotionally supportive for staff as noted by John (2012a) and Page, Clare and Nutbrown (2013).

## Conclusions

This research offers a brief glimpse into how supervision has been enacted within a small number of ECEC settings in England. It has many limitations including the sample size and it was an opportunistic sample, and is likely to contain a bias in terms of participants' interest in and potential preference to develop supervision in their provision. It would be important for further research to be larger scale, and to consider the views of a broader **and more representative** group of participants, and to consider the aspects of supervision that are the most important or helpful. However, the current research highlights that supervision tends to be positioned as focused on the managerial function in relation to safeguarding, as reflected in the guidance from **Ofsted** (2015) and the DfE (2010), and is the responsibility of managers to undertake with their staff. Therefore whilst it may be used to emotionally contain staff, there may be missed opportunities to support those working with young children, including managers, to reflect on their work with children. It would be useful to explore the use of other supervision formats such as horizontal or group supervision which may promote peer supervision and reflective practice as part of the culture of the setting.

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