

How Does Supervision Support Inclusive Teacherhood?

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Abstract

Supervision is a multidimensional concept and phenomenon. In this study, the advantages of supervision and its development in inclusive teacherhood was studied. Inclusive teacherhood means a teacher's professional development and the school culture's change toward participatory school for all students. The study analyzed the views of supervisors with a teaching background on how supervision can be a way to support inclusive teacherhood and its development. This was a qualitative research. The data were obtained using the focus-group interview method focused on supervisors with a teaching background. The interviews were conducted in five places in Finland. The analysis involved a combination of phenomenography, particularly the application called the variation theory, and the classic analysis that is typical of the focus-group research method. According to the findings, supervision provides individual and communal support to inclusive teacherhood. Individual support was given in four ways: empowering and promoting new teacherhood, clarifying teachers' professional growth and roles, helping teachers to evaluate their work, and supporting teachers in challenges at work. Communal support was manifested as strengthening collaboration, promoting a change in the work culture of a school, and developing a communal work approach. At its best, supervision can enable teachers' professional, communal, and personal development in an inclusive learning environment, but more time, resources, and opportunities for supervision should be arranged for teachers.

Keywords: Supervision, Inclusive Teacherhood, Supervisor with a teaching background, Focus group interviews.

Introduction

Supervision in the field of teaching means guidance offered for teachers to support their professional growth. At the moment, supervision has an established position as a well-known and widely-applied method in health care and nursing internationally (e.g., Brunero & Stein-Parbury, 2008; Milne & James, 2002), but in education and teaching, it

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has been less used. For example in Finland, teachers' supervision has been limited, for example, due to lack of funding and scheduling (Alila, 2014). As the teacher's profession becomes more and more versatile, the support provided by supervision can turn out to be quite necessary. Especially, the enhancement of inclusion requires the adaptation of new kinds of thinking, attitudes, and methods from teachers (Ainscow, 2005).

In Finland, supervision has been used for supporting professional growth and research for several decades (Alila, 2014). Although supervision in the field of teaching has been available, it has been established and more used, for example, in nursing. The main reasons for the lesser use in the field of teaching have been lack of resources allocated to it and that it has not an official status in the collective agreement on terms of employment. However, teachers' participation in supervision is currently voluntary, and therefore, teachers, who participate in it, seem to engage in the supervision process well.

Research on supervision is still relatively scarce and more information about its benefits and realization is needed in the field. This study focused on supervisors' perceptions on how supervision supports inclusive teacherhood. They all had a teaching background. Their experiences on how supervision supports the development of inclusive teachers were considered valuable and could provide important practical information.

The Multidimensional Nature of Supervision

Due to its varied theoretical background and practices, supervision cannot be distinctively defined (Milne, 2007). The lack of a solid theory of supervision has actually led to the diversified practices of supervising education (cf., Falender, Burnes, & Ellis, 2012). The concept of supervision resembles the guidance offered for novices teachers in their professional growth (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Sundli, 2007). Other close concepts are, among others, coaching (McLean & Hudson, 2012) referring to a supervision relationship where the coach attempts to support the client's work-related choices. In addition, process consultation and consulting (Lambrechts, Grieten, Bouwen, & Corthouts, 2009), and sparring resemble mentoring (Alila, 2014).

The most central methods of supervision are reflection and dialogue (Löfmark, Morberg, Öhlund, & Ilicki, 2009). Solution-orientation is at the core, when supervision focuses on recognizing a supervisee's strengths. The supervisee's reflection and progress are supported by leaning of experiences of success and goal-setting (McCurdy, 2006; Stark, Frels, & Garza, 2011).

Supervision can also include methods such as acting and drama (Edwards, 2010), and other artistic techniques (Denver & Shiflett, 2011). In an efficient supervision, the supervisor pays attention to interaction and relationships between supervisees, and sticks to task-centered structure (Ladany, Mori & Mehr, 2013). This way supervision can cover even more themes and offer more options to support change processes (Hanna, 2011). A functional group supervision necessitates that the supervisor and supervisees are committed to communal learning (Henderson, 2009).

Inclusion

Inclusion means basic values of students' equal participation that direct education (Hulgin & Drake, 2011). Equal opportunities within a heterogeneous group mean that all students get support in their physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral development within a safe, healthy, and intellectually developing environment (Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014). The increase in students' participation is most of all resulting from teachers' educational choices instead of legislation (Shevlin, 2010).

Inclusive teaching requires a flexible curriculum noticing various learners, accessible school buildings and premises, segregated teaching and evaluation, and teaching staff who has proper education about inclusive practices (Lakkala & Määttä, 2011; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009). Teaching practices suitable for students who need special support have proven to be suitable for other students too (Spaulding & Flanagan, 2012). In all, the development of inclusion in education renews teaching and related values, beliefs, and attitudes (Singal, 2008).

Students' need for support is fulfilled by adjusting the learning environment accordingly. Teachers cannot mold all factors in the learning environment, but they can influence attitudes, attention to segregated methods, and their awareness of students' reactions (Abbott, 2011). According to research, the best support to inclusive teacherhood is education about learning strategies, support of a multi-professional team, and assisting staff in classrooms (Alila, 2014).

The Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) is an approach to teach all students, and it includes the predictive planning and usage of inclusive teaching strategies (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006; Samuels, 2007). The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provide means to do curriculum planning so that it meets every student's various needs (Meo, 2008). Teaching arrangements in classrooms employing the UDL model include collaboration, technological equipment, and segregated teaching (Evans, Williams, King, & Metcalf, 2010).

Learning communities are developed through professional collaboration, reflection, and empowering methods. Thus, students, parents, and communality form the core of school development (Shepherd & Hasazi, 2009). Notwithstanding, the development of inclusive teaching means that special education teacher and classroom teacher education has to renew, too. Collaboration between student teachers of general and special education should be supported already during their education (Laarhoven, Munk, Lynch, Bosma, & Rouse, 2007) and prepare them to realize the broadness of a teacher's work (Florian, 2009).

Supervision in Teachers' Work

Supervision in teaching also leans on collaboration, reflection, and dialogue (Pattison, 2010) as it focuses on a more profound understanding of a teacher's multidimensional role and on a stronger trust in one's teacherhood (Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010). In teachers' supervision, reflection means learning about the practical work. One can develop one's professional skills and practical work through reflecting one's experiences with other professionals in supervision (Carroll, 2010; Clouder & Sellars, 2004). Supervision provides a secured place to reflect one's performance in one's own work (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). According to supervision studies, teacher have been able to change their beliefs and raise their awareness when they have been given the opportunity to reflect on issues related to teaching and learning (Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009). This is especially important to the development of inclusive teacherhood, because the approach requires profound understanding about the nature of inclusion and teachers' ability to reflect on their personal teaching styles, practices, and teacherhood.

Supervision is based on experiential learning (Milne & James, 2002), constructivism (Ibrahim, 2013), team learning (Gillespie, 2012), and the principle of life-long learning. Interaction with colleagues in the learning work community and the opportunity to see colleagues' professional development strengthen teachers' meaningful life-long learning (Alila, 2014).

While supervision is almost a self-evident part of many professionals' work, such as psychologists and psychotherapists, it is strange that supervision has not become an established part of teachers' work. And still teachers' work has fundamentally changed during the shift toward inclusion (Potmesilova, Potmesil, & Roubalova, 2013). Supervision is an efficient support for the development of teachers' expertise. It supports, predicts, guides, and renews teachers within the increasing demands of their work (Goodman, Brady, Duffy, Scott, & Pollard, 2008; Luke, Ellis, & Bernard, 2011). Supervision is needed to help to confront challenges in teachers' work, which have increased due to inclusion.

Method

The purpose of this study is to describe how supervision supports inclusive teacherhood according to supervisors with a teaching background. The following research question was set for this study: According to supervisors with a teaching background, how does supervision support inclusive teacherhood and its development?

The qualitative study approach was employed in this research. To answer the research question, the focus group interview method was chosen as the data collection method. The methodological approach represents fenomenography as it studied human beings' different ways of experiencing, conceptualize, and understand the surrounding world and its phenomena (Marton, 1988). In addition, the research is connected with the variation theory of fenomenography because the other purpose was to analyze the dimension of variation within the phenomenon under investigation and to compare various viewpoints about it (Dahlin, 2007).

Focus group interviews were carried out in the spring of 2010. Eleven supervisors with a teaching background and from five places in Finland were recruited as the research participants. The criteria of selection were that they had been supervising at least for one year and that they were members of the Finnish Supervisors' Association. This association accepts only persons, who have completed a long-term supervising education, as its members. The research participants were women aged from 35 to 65 years.

A focus group interview is a method for discussing a topic in a group, and the discussion is led by the interviewer (Morgan, 2008). In this study, the focus group received nine questions to discuss. The purpose of the questions were to analyze together how mentoring supports inclusive teacherhood (e.g., How could supervision benefit teachers who want to employ inclusive teacherhood?; How could supervision support the development of inclusive teacherhood?) Focus group interviews have increased interest in many fields of research as they provide a functional way of sharing understanding about themes that have been less studied previously (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

When analyzing the data gathered by focus group interviews, themes that emerge in all or several groups and that are mentioned by many persons within one group are the most important ones (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this study, the classic analyzing principles of focus group interviews were followed systematically (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The core of classic focus group interview analysis happens by cutting, categorization, and organization through comparisons and juxtapositions one interview question at a time (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Each answer to a question is read and compared in order to find if the same theme or issue has been mentioned earlier. Similar issues are thus combined together and together they form a category. The analyzing process was long and laborious, and during it, the categories were re-organized and even re-created several times. Eventually, all answers found their places in categories that are here introduced as the themes within the main results. Indeed, another purpose of the analysis was to find the

so-called main thoughts in the data. It refers to a mutual understanding about a theme among the majority of research participants (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). In this study, the main results are organized into themes that represent the number and width of, or the mutual understanding among the supervisors about, these categories in the data.

In the Results section, themes in these two main results categories are introduced by including quotes from the focus group interviews. The codes consist of numbers and letters. The number after the letter K refers to the ordinal number of the quote in the data. The number placed after comma stands for the page the quote can be found in the data transcript.

Results

The findings are organized according to two main results categories that are supervision as personal support and supervision as communal support.

Supervision as Personal Support

Supervision was mentioned to support inclusive teacherhood in six ways. The first was empowering support for teacherhood. Supervision was described to enhance the coping of teachers who work in inclusive learning environments. Teachers learned to make choices that helped them control their work loads. Thus, the varied ways of benefitting from supervision provided an opportunity of empowering in a teacher's work. This was described, for example, as follows:

"...I think that as an approach it [inclusion] is really hard, so you need supervision to stay in control with the approach.." (k276,24)

"So I guess the purpose is... that also teachers are doing good and are able to enjoy their work." (k274,24)

The second theme was the support to the new kind of teacherhood. Supervision provided teachers with opportunities to discover how their teacherhood matched the inclusive teaching approach. This helps them to develop their inclusive teacherhood. When it comes to a teacher's profession, the change does not only cover their professional identity but their own personality too. Supervision can pay attention to this part of the change considerably.

"...you could say that it helps to find that other kind of teacherhood too... the so-called other side of yourself that you need when collaborating" (k666,63)

"I wonder if it is the increase of self-knowledge; if you see the various sides of yourself, the features in which you are a little weaker or worse, and those that are your areas of expertise and strengths and everything in between." (k742,70)

Thirdly, supervision supports teachers' professional growth, as it helps recognizing the development. Supervision can initiate, maintain, and help the development of professional skills and learning at work that inclusion demands. In addition, supervision can help teachers notice their needs for development when they work in an inclusive learning environment.

"...the more the teacher works and the supervisor guides him or her...so the idea of inclusive teaching becomes fulfilled as there are always new groups that include [students] who act differently, think differently, and ... the teacher always has to practice with every new group and increase his or her inclusive awareness." (k750,71)

"...you would help... sort of those people also in the work community to enter the limit of their zones of proximal development, like we try to help the students in the special education classrooms... in the same way, supervision helps you to find it." (k770,75)

Supervision can help teachers to perceive their work role. This means that teachers can clarify and understand how their basic task as teachers changes when developing toward inclusive teacherhood. Supervision provides an opportunity to perceive teacherhood as shared expertise instead of traditional view of teachers acting alone and by themselves. Interviews showed how supervisors discussed the importance of pinpointing the core of teachers' work and that development toward inclusive teacherhood is a process:

"Probably also that you know what is sufficient..." (k277,24)

"To see your own incompleteness." (k253,23)

Fifthly, supervision provides an opportunity to evaluate one's work. Teachers are able to view their work from a distance in supervision. The development toward inclusive teacherhood is supported by guiding the reflection and evaluation of one's work. Supervision teaches a more professional approach to teachers' discussion and interaction skills, and little by little, this reflective perspective becomes one's internalized part of developing in a teacher's work.

"So that you can have a little look at it with an outsider" (k228,21)

"You can sort of compare various viewpoints" (k189,18)

Finally, supervision was also perceived to help with coping with various challenges and difficulties related to inclusion. One cannot particularly practice a teacher's work in front of a class but supervision provides an opportunity to it. Supervision helps coping with challenges at work, and the supervisor's expertise and reliability are extremely crucial in this sense, as highlighted by the interviewees.

"Supervision can help you to internalize the inclusive approach so that first you are just with regular, nice-behaving schoolchildren and do just that teacher's basic work, and then these challenging children and the encounters with them can first seem to be far away from your own comfort zone. But when you get more experienced things change, and your ability to work expands, and your comfort zone gets sort of bigger. So you can control your work more." (k709,68)

"And that the provoking situation happens in a supervision situation, it is a safer situation compared to [if you are alone] and then you can... as a teacher, avoid that confrontation inside your classroom and with that student or a group of students, when you catch the situation through supervision" (k753,71)

Supervision as Communal Support

Supervision was perceived to support inclusive teacherhood in a communal sense in five ways. First, supervision was mentioned to support versatile and multiprofessional cooperation. Students and teachers in teacher training or continuing education do not learn about how to solve conflicts or get help in their work communally. Therefore, supervision was considered a functional channel to practice collaboration and enhance one's collaboration skills.

"If you think that... you school is an inclusive school, you cannot just plan it by yourself, but you have to collaborate with others." (k822,80)

"And then also the collaboration relationships... other teachers and the work community, and parents" (k225,21)

Secondly, supervision supports the change of the whole school culture toward inclusion. Supervision helps developing new practices by adjusting them to the prevailing school culture. In addition, supervision can serve as a tool to lead the change in a controlled manner.

"Exactly, when you aim toward it... It means that the school is in a state of change, and that supervision is about supporting the change and that you cope with the change... cope within the turmoil of change, go through with it, and understand that changes are needed if you are to reach that [inclusion]" (k665,63)

"That is really important... to know what suit your own work community, that is really crucial... supervision has a great role in it, I suppose." (k685,65)

Thirdly, supervision was mentioned to support teacher individuality within the work community. Supervision lets the inclusive work community spring up through noticing its members' individual capabilities. The importance of reflection as the method of supervision becomes emphasized in this form of support. Supervision supports teachers' individuality in the work community and helps to pay attention to each teacher's uniqueness.

"It points out it if you become heard in your supervision group in the first place, it is really important, and they are easily forgotten in the busy school life... so that you can discuss even a few thoughts and get the feeling that you are heard" (k688,66)

"Also in that sense, if you think that you could dare to be more genuine, be yourself" (k689,66)

Fourthly, supervision supports the development of communal work approach. Supervision can support the development of inclusive teacherhood by supporting it as a communal process. Communal work approach requires new kind of attitude to teacherhood, but the adaptation of the attitude can be fostered by supervision. The interviewees discussed how supervision can promote adults' collaboration and communality:

"And indeed, supervision is functional, when people who work in the same workplace, bring the well-being among those people forward in every way." (k724,69)

"And probably when this work community starts to develop, the one with the highest resistance has to develop to some direction although he or she did not participate in it at all." (k736,70)

Finally, supervision is a support to the shared goal of inclusion at school. It takes the whole school community toward inclusive teacherhood and helps finding a shared understanding about inclusion. Because, eventually, inclusion can only happen if the whole school community shares the idea about the objectives and meaning of inclusion.

"And it will become a shared goal, because this is how you make the rules of the game, the mutual goal where you are heading..." (k206,19)

"...one of the requirements of inclusion are that you can have the shared focus" (k499,46)

Conclusions

As the results showed, supervision supports inclusive teacherhood individually and communally. In this study, the focus group interviews surfaced the number of ways supervision can and should support the development of inclusive teacherhood. However, it seems that the theoretical diversity of supervision hinders the support of inclusive teacherhood to some extent. According to this study, the core elements of supervision are goal-orientation, confidentiality, and the supervisor's professionalism. At its best, supervision can form a learning environment of inclusive teacherhood, in which the stability, regularity, and continuity of supervision are the key.

Although supervision that aims at supporting inclusive teacherhood is quite manifold, the main points are to pay attention to the practical challenges introduced by student diversity and to reflect on the main issues with a wide perspective. The varied methods

used in supervision can inspire inclusive practices in teaching, as they encourage teachers to use a wide range of teaching methods and to understand the importance of flexibility in teaching arrangement in practice.

The process-like nature and sufficiently long period of supervision supports supervisee's professional growth. It provides enough time to test and evaluate various solutions and one's inclusive teacherhood. Supervision as the means to support teachers' professional development and learning helps teacher to discover their strengths and enhances the renewal of school culture. The Finnish supervision strongly relies on ethical principles according to which supervision must be highly confidential (Alila, 2014). This kind of confidentiality provides a secure and goal-oriented space for teachers to develop professionally toward inclusive teacherhood.

The reliability of this study can be evaluated from many points of view. The head researcher of this study is a supervisor with teaching background herself, and therefore, her position is not totally objective. Obviously, she has a positive stand and experience about supervision and its significance to the development of inclusive teacherhood. This might have influenced on the way the results are interpreted. However, the personal viewpoint to and experience of the research theme also means immediate experience and profound understanding about the phenomenon. To improve the reliability of analysis, the findings and conclusions were discussed with the research group. In addition, the purpose was to bring out the supervisors' voices when reporting about the findings. This was also to improve reliability as the excerpts from data illustrate how the themes were brought out and discussed by the research participants.

As the number of the research participants was small, the study could even be defined as a mini focus group research (Krueger & Casey, 2009). However, the size of the group is also justifiable because these people present a marginal group based on their expertise and supervision experience in Finland. The interviewees also showed a positive attitude to supervision, and its possibilities to support the development of inclusive teacherhood were, thus, seen very high. Their versatile experiences provided a profound discussion about the support supervision can provide to the adaptation of inclusion in schools. The way the supervisees had experienced supervision was not studied in this research, but it would make a good add and presents a need for further research.

Discussion

The findings of this study are in line with other researchers' findings. For example, Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, and Tomlinson (2009; see also Sundli, 2007) have confirmed that supervision can promote the renewal of teaching practices. Supervision is a method of supporting professional development toward participatory school for all students (Potmesilova, Potmesil, & Roubalova, 2013). In all, supervision is a way to view one's professional development through a confidential relationship. "Confidentiality in coaching and supervision is key", have noticed also Connor and Pokora (2012, p. 3). When the supervisor has a special training for this task, it is possible to offer quality supervision. Supervision can become a learning environment in which teachers can learn and expand their skills and knowledge toward inclusive teacherhood and in which their values and attitudes to inclusion mold with their professional growth. Supervision can also help teachers to cope with the challenges of their work and to develop, learn, and dedicate to it, which was also shown by Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) study.

Fundamentally, supervision as a manifold method helps supervisees to acknowledge their own expertise (see also Shachar et al., 2012). The development of inclusive teacherhood necessitates also the recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses, needs for development. Teachers are also expected to react to others' expectations. Supervision

can support their professional growth so that teachers can feel capable to renew not only themselves as teachers but also their work practices as inclusion necessitates with and in the multiprofessional work community. Inclusive education calls for a change in school practices (Bourke, 2009), and, therefore, teachers must feel supported to develop toward inclusive teacherhood (Ainscow, 2008).

Although supervision also requires financial investment, its profits can be seen in the future. Indeed, for example Zepada (2011) points out that the development of inclusive school challenges the school administrators to recognize, understand, and promote features that enhance the success of all students at school. The beneficial outcomes of supervision include better work satisfaction and attendance, renewed and more reasonable teaching arrangements, and overall improvement in work quality. As more time and opportunities for supervision are arranged for teachers, it can become a natural method in the field of education, as well.

However, also supervision has to develop in order to meet the needs of changing work (see also Connor & Pokora, 2012; de Janasz & Sullivan, 2004). In school work, these changes include, among others, new curricula, the development of learning strategies and equipment, and the diversifying student population with various skills, attitudes, values, and cultures. From this perspective, the framework and multi-method nature of supervision appear a downright advantage and opportunity.



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