Supervised Teacher Development Groups – Super and Visionary to Whom and What?

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Abstract

Supervised teacher groups have increasingly become a new way to meet demands for professional development in Swedish schools. The general purpose is to engage small groups of teachers in guided ongoing dialogues about their work, although the activity takes different forms. The purpose of the current study is to examine what principals', supervisors' and teachers' perspectives on supervised teacher groups as means for learning and development are.

A pre-study (web survey) among Swedish principals (Åberg 2004) shows a great deal of interest in guided professional dialogues, and an overwhelming conviction that they are a valuable means for school development. The results raise some important questions: Why are principals so enthusiastic? What kind of development is supported in these groups? What are the potential outcomes?

The results of the follow-up interview survey with principals show that even though no systematic evaluations have been carried out at schools regarding what development group supervision supports, principals experience a number of positive changes within several areas: development of professional language, reflection and increased ability to clarify and deal with work tasks, improved problem-solving ability without expert assistance, improved cooperation and increased personal certainty in the professional role.

There are examples of group supervision where the aim has primarily been adaptation to one another and to the objectives of the organization. However, there are, more importantly, many examples of development-focused group learning, groups that have become stronger, that have begun to question existing orders, groups that begin to look for their own answers and solutions to a greater extent, that have received insight and increased resources for independent actions and that, aided by supervision, have been able to break out of destructive patterns and poorly functioning cooperation.

Introduction

Educational reforms, especially over the last 15 years, have made imperative the need for urgent and high-quality staff development and training (Earley & Bubb 2004). According to Fullan (1991) and Fullan & Hargreaves (1998), continuous teacher learning and professional development are the cornerstones for educational change and instructional improvement. But the learning cannot be packed up into one-shot workshops, courses and in-service days. Teachers need to do much more learning on the job, or in parallel with it – where they may constantly test, refine and get feedback on the improvements they make. They need access to other colleagues to obtain this learning (Fullan & Hargreaves 1998, p. 90).

There is a wide spectrum of models for teachers' professional development. Kennedy (2004) identifies nine models of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), which she classifies and organizes in relation to potential opportunities available for teachers to influence the agenda and thereby capacity for supporting teacher autonomy and transformative practice; the training model, the award-bearing model, the deficit model, the cascade model, the standards-based model, the coaching/mentoring model the community of practice model, the action research model and the transformative model. The transformative model, is considered to have the greatest potential, and its key characteristic is a real sense of awareness of issues of power, i.e., whose agendas are being addressed through the process" (op.cit. p. 11). This model often involves collaborative teacher activities.

The British Department for Education and Employment (2001 a:6, in Earley & Bubb 2004) recommends collaborative CPD models, and states that the most successful strategy for professional development is "learning from and with other teachers". Collaborative models for teacher professional development are also of growing interest in Sweden, where supervised teacher groups have increasingly become a new way to meet the demands for competence development. Supervision in this context refers to a group-based activity, led by a facilitator, which engages teachers in ongoing dialogues about their work. The Swedish supervisory practice may be organized in a number of different ways, and for a number of different reasons, although the international interest of *reflection on action* and *reflected practice* seems to have had the strongest impact.

While group supervision might be presumed to be mostly a means of supporting teacher growth, professionalism and autonomy, it cannot be assumed that this is uncontested. Kennedy (2004, p. 12) cites Burbank and Kauchak (2003), who argue that even within many collaborative forms of CPD, which might be represented in the transformative category above, the parameters of the activity are defined by some external party, usually in a position of power. So while the capacity for teacher autonomy is greater in transformative models, this does not in itself imply that the capacity is necessarily fulfilled (Kennedy 2004, p.12).

 Alexandersson (1999) states that collaborative reflection in practice runs the risk of becoming a ritualized participation, where teachers are engaged in an activity that does not really give them the opportunity to influence the direction and culture of their school. Teachers may be forced to accept "consensus" instead of developing critical thinking, and to adjustment instead of autonomy. Søndenå (2004) also treats the tension between the different views of reflection. On the one hand, reflection meaning adjustment, on the other, critical reflection and new thinking.

It may be established that there is a lack of knowledge about what influences the supervised teacher development groups, and how the activities per se influence teacher performance.

Objectives of the study

This study is aimed at analyzing how principals, supervisors and supervised teachers perceive the educational qualities in group supervision. What are their thoughts regarding group supervision as an element of professional growth and learning for teachers? What kind of learning and development do they experience? What contextual factors and supervisory strategies affect this development?

As a pre-study, a questionnaire was administrated to Swedish principals throughout the country (Åberg 2004). The answers indicate a great deal of interest in guided professional dialogues as well as an overwhelming conviction that they are a valuable means for school development. The question arises: Why are principals so enthusiastic?

The data reported in this paper is based on interviews with principals. The guiding questions that frame this interview study are as follows:

- How do principals perceive supervised professional discussions in teacher groups as a means for professional growth and learning?
- What, according to the principals, are the contextual factors and supervisory strategies that have an impact on group supervision in terms of promoting teacher growth and learning?
- What kind of learning and development do principals experience as an outcome of group supervision?

Theoretical Framework

Since the early 1900s, supervision has gone through an evolutionary process. From the early conventional approaches, it has evolved into the human relations supervision, and currently it is taking shape into a more collaborative and collegial form (Glickman, et al. 2003). According to the changes in the paradigms, the function and processes of supervision have also evolved.
In 1989, Edward Pajak headed an American study aimed at identification and verification of the dimensions of proficiency associated with effective supervisory practice. By reviewing textbooks and research literature on supervision, and by surveying outstanding practicing supervisors, he could confirm that there is a high degree of consensus concerning the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are most relevant and important to effective supervisory practice. Pajak identified twelve domains, of particular importance: communication, staff development, instructional program, planning and change, motivating and organizing, curriculum, problem solving and decision making, service to teachers, personal development, community relations and research and program evaluation (Pajak 1989).

Glatthorn (1987) states that "an encouraging development in instructional development is the widespread interest in peer-centered options such as cooperative development (Glatthorn 1984), colleague consultation (Goldsberry 1986) and peer coaching (Brandt 1987). He uses *cooperative professional development* as an inclusive term to embrace different forms of peer-oriented systems. Cooperative professional development is "a process by which small teams of teachers work together, using a variety of methods and structures, for their own professional growth. Small teams of two to six people seem to work best. The definitive characteristic is cooperation among peers, the methods and structures vary" (Glatthorn op.cit.). Glatthorn attempts to systemize different approaches, and he found five different ways in which small teams of teachers can work together: professional dialogue, curriculum development, peer supervision, peer coaching and action research.

> Professional dialogue occurs when small groups of teachers meet regularly for the guided discussion of their own teaching as it relates to current development in education. The objective is to facilitate reflection about practice, helping teachers become more thoughtful decision makers. Other approaches, such as peer supervision and peer coaching, are concerned with teacher skills, but professional dialogue puts cognition at the center (Glatthorn).

Glatthorn stresses that *guided* discussion ensures that the process does not degenerate into unproductive verbal posturing. Different discussion models can be used for professional dialogues. Glatthorn presents an approach derived from Buchmann (1985), which follows a three-stage format in each session to make dialogue productive. The steps emphasize first external knowledge, second personal knowledge and finally implications of the discussion for teacher practice. Another discussion model is used by Schön (1983), who describes an approach concerned with teachers' reflection in action. According to Glatthorn "the important consideration is to ensure that the dialogues have enough direction and coherence to make them professionally productive" (Glatthorn).

Through social interaction we learn new ways of thinking and acting. Learning happens in dialogue with others. This thought is central in the cultural historical perspective, which forms the theoretical basis for this study. Thinking is not just an individual, but also a collective process - something that happens between people as well as inside their heads (Lave 1988). However, what we say is for many reasons not what we think. Human speech is always determined by context, and does not only express our inner world of thoughts and concepts (Säljö 2000).

Method
The study is qualitative, using data from interviews and a pre-study web survey.

Web survey
Questionnaires were mailed to 1,698 principals all over Sweden in August 2004. The rate of response was 30% or 433 answers. The web survey was used to collect information on the following questions:

- How common is group facilitation in different kinds of schools?
- What motives do schools have for performing school facilitation?
- What forms of facilitation exist concerning organization, content and types of facilitators?

- What experienced pedagogical and professional changes are derived from group facilitation?
- How do principals understand the benefit of group facilitation as means for different dimensions of school development?

The answers of the survey served as a basis for the design of the interviews. The most striking result of the survey was the great interest for guided professional dialogues shown by principals, and the overwhelming conviction that they are a valuable means of professional development. These findings brought to the fore some questions about what kind of development is supported in the groups. Does it merely support teacher adjustment, or does it also have the capacity for supporting autonomy and transformative practice?

Principal interviews
The principals to be interviewed were selected among those who answered the questionnaire, and also had stated that they were agreeable to be interviewed. From this group a second selection was made; everyone who had answered:

1. "totally agree" to the question if they consider supervised teacher groups to be a valuable means of development of teacher competence *and*
2. that they consider their knowledge of group supervision to be good *and*
3. that they have taken part in some kind of supervisor training *and*
4. that they have received group supervision themselves, *and*
5. that they have supervised a group themselves.

All criteria were fulfilled by 13 principals. Of these, one was excluded due to personal reasons[1]. Review of background information regarding the remaining twelve principals shows that the group had a good spread in terms of gender, age, size of municipality, type of school, own basic education and number of years as a principal.

The interviews were performed over a two week period in February, 2006.

The interviews were semi structured. The starting point consisted of three open-ended questions (as well as questions regarding background information). These concerned:

- Experience of group supervision
- Conceptions of group supervision
- Understanding of group supervision as a means for learning and development in the school.

In addition, spontaneous, follow-up questions were posed, based on the interviewee's answers. These questions were important for in-depth understanding of the information that was provided. The interviews were recorded, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. They were transcribed word for word, interpreted and categorized based on the themes that materialized in the material.

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[1] I have had extensive supervisor assignments at this principal's school.

Findings and Discussions

The results that are presented here constitute parts of a study that will provide the basis for a doctoral thesis. The study consists of two primary segments, a pre-study in web-survey format for principals, and an interview survey that was directed to principals, supervisors and supervised. The results of the pre-study and the principal interviews are presented in this paper. Presentation of the complete results is planned for 2007.

Web survey

The purpose of the web survey pre-study was to look into some questions about facilitated teacher development groups in Swedish schools. How common is this type of activity? How is it organized? Does it generate any observable changes? How do principals understand the benefit of the facilitated group discussions?

The answers show a great interest in facilitated teacher development groups among principals. A majority (60.1%) of the responding principals stated that facilitated group discussions have been carried out in their school districts within the last two years. Three of the questions in the survey were related to the Pajak's study (1989), which identified twelve dimensions of particular importance to supervisory practice. These dimensions were adapted to Swedish conditions, and provided the basis for the response alternatives in questions concerning:

- motives for performing group facilitation
- observed changes as a result of group facilitation
- the respondents' understanding of in which areas group facilitation could be of particular importance.

The respondents verify the importance and relevance of all twelve domains of guided teacher development groups. Five of the dimensions occur as the most frequent in all three questions in the survey. These are: Problem Solving and Decision Making, Staff Development, Instructional Program, Relation, Motivating and Organizing.

Almost 90% of the principals considered facilitated group discussions to have caused some kind of observable changes. Development was discovered in all twelve of the different domains, but most common in the same five areas as above. It may be established that the correspondence between motives and outcomes seems positive, which makes it possible to assume that group facilitation may serve as an effective means for attended school development.

Almost every respondent considered group facilitation to be a valuable means of developing teacher competence. In their view, many teachers should also have an interest in participating in a supervised development group.

Group supervision has been carried out with a number of different types of supervisors such as teachers for special needs, counselors/psychologists, consultants with specialty areas (such as child psychiatry expertise) and university staff. External supervisors with specific credentials as supervisors are most common.

Many principals have experience themselves of group supervision, both as participants and as acting supervisors. Several had also received some form of competence development within the area. Over 60%, thus, considered themselves as having solid knowledge of group supervision.

Interviews with principals

Principals' understanding of group supervision as a concept and activity
Despite the common designation "group supervision", when principals describe the concept, greatly varying characteristics are demonstrated depending upon whose understanding is being expressed. Certain principals perceive supervision as a discussion method. When they speak of supervision, they describe a method of discussion, i.e., a discussion that is held by what they perceive as a supervisory method. Others describe supervision as a model, a planned and structured activity with determined characteristics.

The aims of group supervision also vary. The four most common aims of the activity are described in Figure 1:

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Overall aims	Specific aims
Problem management	Manage specific problems. Increase preparation for managing future problems.
Pedagogical development	Increase teacher competence and pedagogical skill. Provide opportunities for reflection on choices, motives, standpoints. Develop professional language.
Group development	Improve cooperation. Better to take advantage of group members' various resources. Create synergy effects.
Personal development	Support personal development. Prevent burn-out.

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Fig. 1: Aims of group supervision.

Various areas of friction arise on a daily basis in everyday school life. Problems might pertain to students and parents, or they might pertain to conflicts at the workplace. In these contexts, it is common that supervision is initiated, either by staff or the principal. Such supervision can have the character of urgent measures; it is an emergency situation and the supervisor is expected to provide answers and solutions. The issue is one of consultative supervision, that is, an expert of some sort is summoned to be of assistance in managing the particular problem that has arisen. When the situation has been solved, and the problem no longer exists, the consultant's task is complete. For the teacher, learning in consultative supervision may be related to his/her own limitations, that there are problems outside our control that require expert assistance. Principals point out, however, that group supervision in connection to problem management can also

contribute to strengthening the staff's preparedness for dealing with similar problems in the future. The type of supervision method utilized is decisive. Some tell about how teachers when utilizing maieutic group supervision (see below) were able to develop the ability of collaboratively finding solutions to problems within teacher groups, and thus, reduce need for outside assistance.

When principals speak of pedagogical development, several different aspects of the concept are included. It can involve development of teaching methods and approaches, improved reception of students and parents, reflection on efforts and development of a professional language. Different formats and models are described, but what is common to most of them is the clearly defined group, the supervisor that has the pronounced task of being supervisor, ensuring that discussions recur on an ongoing basis according to what has been determined and that discussion content is steered by participants.

It is not really possible to separate the teacher group's inner dynamics from the teachers' work related to pedagogical tasks, according to principals in the study. Pedagogical work suffers if the group does not function; for that reason, relationships and group dynamics processes must be taken notice of if and when work is to be developed.

It is common that teacher groups need help in developing cooperation and relationships, but it is also common that principals and management groups receive group development supervision. Several principals also provided examples of how group supervision helped group members reach well-supported decisions regarding terminating cooperation or even splitting up a poorly functioning teacher group.

Psychologists often function as supervisors in these contexts, but there are also examples of principals themselves supervising group-development activities. That principals have this type of dual role is considered deeply problematic by other principals (see below).

Principals say the teaching profession is demanding, and that teachers need support both in terms of prevention and in professional crisis situations. The need to delimit the professional undertaking, i.e., receive assistance in understanding whose demands are actually pressuring the individual, is mentioned by several principals. Expectations and demands on teachers are not always external, many originate from the teacher him/herself. Group supervision can provide relief and prevent burn-out, say principals. Furthermore, discussion can contribute to increased self-awareness and personal maturity, which several interviewees point out as more important for teacher professionalism than subject knowledge.

Supervisor discussions are structured in different ways, that is, different combinations of methods are used; methods for choosing discussion content and methods for appointing the person or people who will be supervised, as well as methods for leading the discussion. Primarily three discussion methods are used: maieutic, guidance and consultative. These are described in Figure 2.

Discussion method	The discussion aims to	Supervisor's approach
Maieutic method	To liberate and challenge the thinking of those supervised.	Supervisor and group pose questions to the supervised. Advice can be given, but not too early in the process.
Guidance method	That the supervised should formulate goals and discover paths to get there.	The supervisor helps the supervised formulate what they would like to achieve and suggests paths to get there.
Consultative method	For the supervised to receive assistance in managing the problem and standstills.	The supervisor gets involved in the problem aided for example by discussion and observation and then offers advice and a number of suggestions for solutions.

Figure 2: Supervision method, aims and supervisor approaches.

Maieutic is the name of Socrates' discussion method (as described by Plato) that attempts to free a person's existing knowledge. Transferred to group supervision, maieutic supervised discussion means that instead of the supervisor contributing with new knowledge, s/he aims to deliberate knowledge that already exists within a supervised group.

Guidance supervised discussion entails the guide supporting the supervised in formulating goals and in discovering paths that lead to these goals. According to principals, supervised discussions are often guided and goal-steered, and are, thus difficult to separate from guidance discussion.

In the consultative discussion, the supervisor assists those supervised discover solutions to a problem. The supervisor is consulted as an expert within the area in question, and empowered by greater knowledge, is expected actively to contribute solutions to the problem. Efforts of this nature are common in schools, and the people who are consulted might be, for example, psychologists, teachers for special needs or external specialists from psychiatry units specializing in children and youths.

Significance of various action strategies
One of the primary issues for the interviews is to determine how various supervisor strategies, i.e. planned courses of action, affect group supervision's opportunities to support learning and development. Principals in the study say that important decisions are choice of supervisor, composition of the supervisor group and establishment of a framework and contract for supervisory activities.

The initiative for group supervision can originate from two different areas, in part from the group and in part from the principal, and choice of the supervisor can be done in different ways. External supervisors are often recommended from school to school. This means that a supervisor can work in many different working units within the same organization, and in that way "lead in a kind of periphery, hidden and invisible, and often removed from being questioned and criticized" (Högberg 2005, p.215, my translation.). In other instances, supervision is obtained through contracting. Choice of supervisor is steered by the contractor, which places high demands on contracting competence which is not always existent, according to the interviews. Staff have very limited or non-existent opportunities to affect the choice of supervisor, which is troublesome, according to principals, who believe that the affected supervisor group should be given the opportunity to meet the supervisor prior to commencement of supervision, as results are affected by if the group's needs correspond to what the supervisor can offer.

Critics, among others Högberg (2005), say, however, that when a leader's task is reduced to carrying out staff wishes, supervision can become something that is carried on the periphery of the organization's development of activities. The primary objective of supervision is often to prevent stress and burn-out, or to promote the ability to utilize oneself as a work tool – i.e., individual-based issues. In addition, external supervisors are often considered too unaware of the organizational and community context. The supervisor function entails supervisor competence, real and/or formal. Competence can be defined as sufficient ability to deal with a certain situation, to be able to perform a specific task. Supervisor competence involves, thus, having sufficient competence to be able to carry out supervision with the aim and within the framework of which the order pertains. It is important to place high demands on supervisor competence. In general, principals in the study are aware that there are risks involved with group supervision. There are examples of group participation that have resulted in personal crisis and sick leave. The supervisor must, therefore, be clear regarding the aim of supervision and what his/her own boundaries are in terms of supervisor competence.

Another issue is if it is necessary for the supervisor to have knowledge and experience from the school world. Principals are, to a certain extent, of different opinions on this issue. Some think that it can be an advantage if the supervisor does not know a great deal about schools, and is not loaded down with preconceived notions. Others think that cultural competence is necessary if the supervisor is to receive legitimacy in the group.

Supervisor groups with which principals in the study have experience are of various types: teacher groups, pre-school staff, core-subject teachers at high schools, principals within a district, student healthcare staff, etc. There are different conceptions regarding how a supervisor group should be composed, but the aim of activities should be what guides the process. When the aim is to develop the teacher group, these groups constitute the natural supervisor group. If the problem concerns a specific student, the suitable supervisor group consists of the staff that is involved with the student. However, in connection with pedagogical supervision, there are advantages involved with teacher groups and in collecting people in the same profession from different teacher groups or schools. In the latter case, opportunities are provided, unimpeded by preconceived notions, for new and fresh questions and new perspectives, but the group cannot be too big. Principals believe that between five and eight people constitute the ultimate group size.

Interviewees point out the importance of group supervision being surrounded by a stable framework, which means that an initial contract should be drawn up between the supervisor and the group. It is advantageous if the contract is in writing, and the content should clarify what the discussions involve: aim, content limitations, timeframes, confidentiality, rules for being together, etc. Principals describe occasions where it has been helpful to be able to refer to the contract to prevent the discussion from deteriorating into personal conflicts, for example. A contract can, however, be amended at any time that the supervisor and group members deem this to be the best course of action; there must always be opportunity for flexibility and renewal in the supervision situation.

The significance of contextual factors for group supervision
Every school develops a special culture, i.e., a manner of perceiving and approaching situations, that permeates the organization for those who work there. According to Vygotskij, it is only possible to understand individual or group development if the individual's interplay with the social and cultural context is observed, and if the individual is studied in terms of how s/he obtains the means typical of the culture in which s/he is formed to interact and process that world. Several factors are named in the interviews as being considered significant in order for group supervision to contribute to development. Included are support from school administration, staff participation, school culture concentration towards individualism or cooperation and the staff's expressed or implied perceptions.

That the principal's commitment and expressed support for group supervision are important factors is expressed in the interviews. School administration's interest and ability in organizing supervision activities and making them a part of long-term development are very important. There is a difference of opinion regarding if supervision should be voluntary or not. On the one hand are principals who understand group supervision as necessary for the school's development, and therefore solely decide who should participate. On the other hand are principals who understand willingness and respect for the individual's choice as important principles for the culture they want to permeate their schools.

Pre-school has to a larger extent and for a longer period of time than, for example, the later years of grades 1-9 had a cooperative culture, express principals in the interviews. Within pre-school is a long-time tradition of common planning; teachers speak to one another about teaching and work is more transparent than within grades 1-9. Staff reviews its work, parents provide feedback on work, teachers discuss to discover solutions and take common stands. That is why interest in group supervision is particularly large within pre-schools, say principals. At schools with younger children, teachers are also more interested in supervision, and are more eager to learn about their role in relationship to the child, than schools with older students, express principals in the study. One interviewee with a background in national defense, compares the culture of both environments, and says that staff in schools is not particularly interested in learning from one another.

At some workplaces, perceptions or norms that can inhibit the organization develop. Examples of such norms are those that depreciate further education, certification, career and individual responsibility (Ellström & Hultman 2004). Principals provide several examples of it being

difficult to return to school after having participated in competence development training, for example to become a supervisor.

What type of learning and development is supported by group supervision?
Not all forms of cooperation between colleagues lead to learning and competence development. Neither is it possible to say that all forms of learning lead to development of individual thinking, knowledge, competence or personality; rather, certain forms of learning can entail adaptation to existing living or working conditions, even unfavorable ones, by resulting in pacification or subordination, for example.

It was previously established in this paper that no systematic evaluations of the effects of group supervision have been done at the schools, rather what the interviewees have based their conceptions on are subjective experience. Principals' positive attitudes to group supervision that have been indicated in the survey are also apparent in the interviews. This is not surprising as the selection of the twelve principals included in the study was made based on their interest in group supervision.

Interviewees relate positive changes as a result of group supervision in several areas: improved ability to solve problems without expert help, development of professional language, reflection and increased ability to manage work tasks, improved cooperation and increased personal certainty in professional role.

There are examples of adaptability-focused development; principals often define themselves in terms of agreement and adaptation regarding relationships and group development. It is often a case of "pulling in the same direction" and "not wanting to change everything". The consultative supervision that is often used in connection with problem management can also be said to support reproductive learning.

There are, however, many examples of experienced development-focused learning in connection with group supervision. Principals provide examples of groups that have begun to question existing orders, that have begun to look for their own answers and solutions to a greater extent, have been able to break out of destructive patterns and poorly functioning cooperation, and that, aided by supervision, have received insight and increased resources for independent actions.

Importance of the study
In Swedish schools, an increasing amount of resources are being invested in supervised teacher development groups. However the activity has to a very limited extent been problematized, and there is a lack of knowledge concerning quality and impact on teacher performance. This study will make a contribution within this field.

There is a great need for further research within the field; for example, there is a complete lack of support in organizational goals and prioritizations as well as which qualifications group supervision actually reinforces.

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