THE ROLE OF SUPERVISION IN A HEALTHY ORGANIZATION: THE CASE OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES

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Introduction

It had to happen. The recent changes in the funding and accountability of schools are presenting inevitable challenges to the LEA management, inspection, service and support sectors. Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) have not been immune to this process, and most will have been party to the urgent review and restructuring exercises that have taken place during the last 18 months.

This special issue of *Educational and Child Psychology* is focusing on supervision, a process and practice that has characterised the development of the EPS in recent years. The aim of this paper is to review some recent developments in organizational theory, and in particular reconsider the role of supervision from the perspective of recent research into the healthiness of organizations.

Industrialization and the quest for ever greater productivity resulted in attention to the ways in which jobs could be simplified, requiring less skilled labour, lower wages and productivity costs, and, it was argued, greater output. Adam Smith (after whom the Institute was named) advocated the concept of a "division of labour" as early as the 1700s. This idea continued in various forms until it was redefined in the early twentieth century by F. W. Taylor who introduced the concept of "scientific management" and bequeathed the legacy of "Taylorism". Taylor advocated a systematic analysis of the tasks involved in production, and the identification of those "burdens and duties" which could be undertaken by a manager, so that the workers could be free to concentrate on production without the distraction of management tasks. These might include decision making (including how best to carry out the work), planning, responsibility and control. For many workers, of course, these are the very activities which make the work worth while.

Curiously, the more systematic study of work which generated Taylorism also ushered in the contrasting "Human Relations" movement. This latter approach had its origins in the famous Western Electric Company "Hawthorne" studies in Chicago during the 1920s, which reinforced the importance of personal and emotional factors in the workplace. This gave rise to a renewed emphasis on personnel relations, counselling, team building and, latterly, Employee Assistance Programmes. Many of these initiatives have been pioneered by the Tavistock Centre for Human Resources in the UK.

It was not until the 1970s, at a time of great interest in "Managing by Objectives" (MBO), that the slowly emergent School Psychological Services started to review not only their practice, but also the way in which they were organized. The Portsmouth service sponsored and published a service evaluation, at a time when the DECP organized an influential symposium on MBO and psychological services. The future organizational path for most LEA services was mapped out from that date.

The 1970s were also associated with a significant growth in the size of educational psychology services, and this probably lay behind the interest in MBO, as principal psychologists and service managers sought to make organizational sense of the complex organizations for which they were responsible. A subsequent expansion of services occurred in the mid 1980s, following implementation of the 1981 Education Act. But this was followed, almost immediately, by radical changes in both the LEAs (which provide the funding for the EPSs) and the schools (who provide the client relationship). While it seems likely that the EPSs will continue to exist and be centrally (i.e. LEA) funded, at least for the short term, there are serious questions about their future role and levels of staffing. Principal psychologists are now facing the task of managing and planning in a climate of diminishing resources, a reversal of the trend that has characterized service developments during the last 70 years. (It is interesting to note that the Nottingham service actually took on more staff during the Second World War as the effects of evacuation on the emotional adjustment of children were recognized.)

Person-environment fit model

An important concept in thinking about organizations, and one which links research on both sides of the Atlantic, is that of "person-environment fit", originally developed at Michigan University (French et al., 1982). Reduced to its essentials, this model distinguishes between the person and the work environment, and also between their subjective and objective aspects.

For the EPS, the service's objective environment might be characterized by its written aims and objectives, job descriptions, procedures, minutes of meetings, memos, reports, physical setting and resources. This also includes what the service provides for its employees, i.e. salary, variety, development opportunities, security and the chance to contribute to planning and decision making. The service also makes demands of its psychologists, and expects them to have expertise in professional and technical skills as well as a commitment to the organization.

The subjective environment, on the other hand, is the collective staff perceptions of the service, what it does and how it goes about it, and this might be a very different matter. Whether the salary is seen as adequate, whether the amount of variety and opportunities to exercise professional skills and contribute to the work and organization of the service are seen as acceptable will reflect individual judgements and shared perceptions among the staff. The subjective environment also takes account of the quality of the relationships between staff, including service managers, and feelings of trust and support within the service. It also includes the language, images and metaphors that are employed ("who are the 'heroines' and 'villains' within the service and its development?") Morgan (1986) also points to the importance of the culture within an organization, and its relationship with management. He quotes from a Japanese manufacturing company's policy (Figure 1).

"It seems silly to Westerners", says one executive, "but every morning at 8 a.m., all across Japan, there are 87,000 people reciting the code of values and singing together. It's like we are all a community". I should be intrigued to receive suggestions from colleagues about their own service's "Spiritual Values".

On the individual, as opposed to the organizational level, staff will also have their own subjective views on how well they, as personnel, match the technical, professional and

Company policy at the Matsushita Electric Company

Seven "spiritual" values

1. National service through industry
2. Fairness
3. Harmony and co-operation
4. Struggle for betterment
5. Courtesy and humility
6. Adjustment and assimilation
7. Gratitude

Figure 1.

personal requirements of the job. These views may or may not tally with an objective assessment of those skills and personal qualities.

The important element is the degree of harmony between these various perspectives. All contribute, and any organizational approach which focuses on one at the expense of the others provides an incomplete account. The more they are in tune and the less the mismatch between them, the healthier the staff. Conversely, imbalance or mismatch adversely influences the psychological and physical health of the employees.

Our personal strategies for reducing the mismatch can take the form of coping (problem-solving) or various forms of "denial" (e.g. defending ourselves from the objective "realities" of our predicament). In the former instance, further training or professional development may improve the situation, as may job redesign. On the other hand "denial" may take the form of blaming others, a refusal to recognize that a difficulty exists, or distracting ourselves from facing up to the uncomfortable realisation. For instance, we may throw ourselves into non-essential but time filling activities, over-indulge in squash, alcohol or social pursuits. (In studies of New Zealand teachers, Dewe (1986), categorized their responses to work related stress as being "problem focused", in which the work difficulties were confronted directly, or "palliative", in which the aim was to deal with the unpleasant feelings. This has proved a useful dichotomy for categorizing coping responses.)

French and his colleagues provided empirical evidence to support the link between the person-environment fit and the health and wellbeing of the employee (French et al., 1982). The way in which work is organized, therefore, contributes to the source and solution of many of the work related stresses and strains. "Misfit" or lack of balance, which are at the core of the P-EF model, result in the worker experiencing feelings such as job dissatisfaction, boredom and depression, or somatic complaints and increased smoking and drinking..

"Organizational healthiness"

The model of organization healthiness developed by Cox and his co-workers at Nottingham draws on the notion of "fit" and the distinction between the subjective and objective dimensions of the organization which are central to the P-E Fit approach.

Much of their research into organizational healthiness has been carried out with teachers, and the original impetus for the work was stimulated by the link between teaching and stress. Cox proposed a transactional model in which stress results from the mismatch

between the perceived pressures of the work situation and the individual's perception of his or her ability to cope, and this is accompanied by adverse emotional feelings or symptoms of poor health (Cox, 1978). This definition was included within a general "systems theory" approach to health, in which the individual is recognized as belonging to a number of interrelated and interacting systems, including those of the workplace.

As with biological systems, organizations (including schools and the EPS) can be construed as using homeostatic mechanisms to maintain a degree of stability both within and between their respective subsystems. Schools are also examples of open systems which both influence and are influenced by the other systems in which they are embedded or to which they relate (e.g. the neighbourhood community, local and central government, the network of pupil and child focused services, professional training agencies). Schools draw pupils from their neighbourhood and in turn feed them back with added academic and personal and social skills.

As complex organizations such as schools or EPSs pursue multiple goals, they need to maintain a balance between their respective subsystems to ensure a "good enough" rather than a perfect solution to their varied organizational problems. Single-minded pursuit of one goal at the expense of others creates an imbalance. For instance, a school which introduces hard-driving, top-down, "Type A" management procedures to boost pupils' attainments at the expense of staff development and collegial support may produce stress and burn out among the teachers. Cox and Howarth (1990) coin Simon's concept of "satisficing" to describe this need for balance between the various organizational goals. For the EPS, an example might be found in the balance between staff development and the pressures to make financial savings. Abandoning staff and service development may enable a service to hit financial targets, but it may also impair its ability to adapt flexibly and effectively to the changing requirements of the job, and its ultimate survival.

Figure 2. Organizational healthiness in relation to the goodness of four psychological subsystems: task, development, problem-solving and the strength of social context
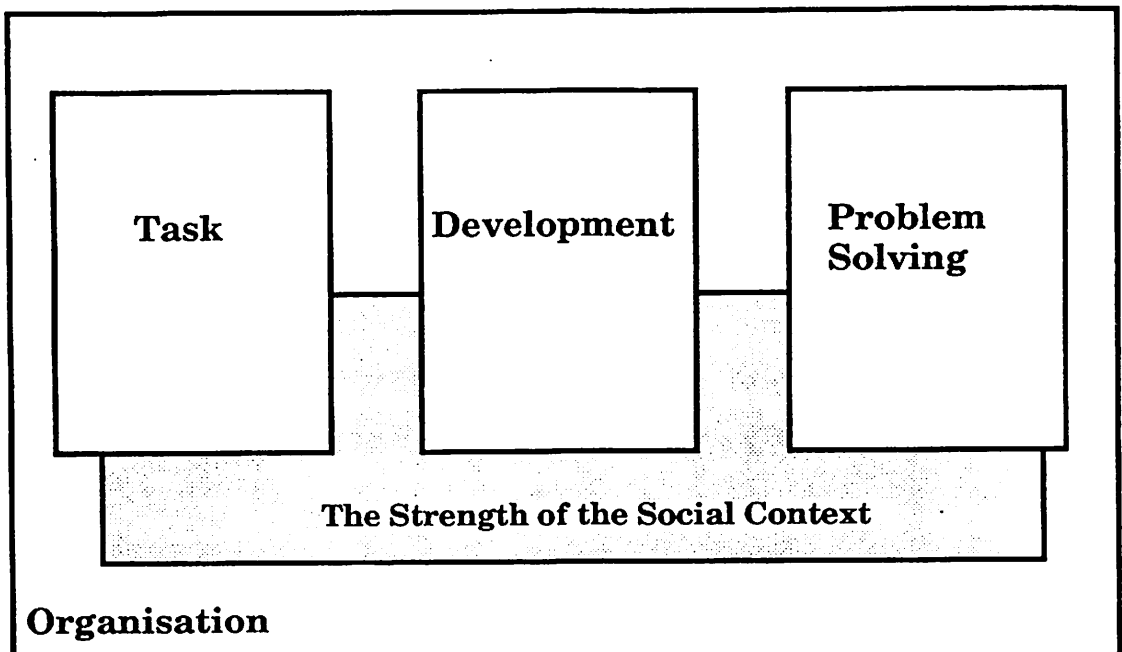
This is not to deny the economic realities which face services (or any organization) but to recap on the overall organizational implications of changes within any one subsystem.

A healthy organization, therefore, will demonstrate harmony between its subjective and objective dimensions. It will respond to changing circumstances without sacrificing its capacity for proactive action and forward planning. It will meet its goals. In so doing it will balance the need for staff to share a common set of organizational goals against the ability to tolerate the expression of a wide range of different viewpoints. It will also maintain a "good enough" fit both within and between its internal subsystems, as well as with the overall organization or systems within which it is embedded. This balance, or fit, will be reflected in the healthiness of the organization and the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of its staff.

Cox has developed an Organisational Health Inventory, which has enabled the statistical testing of this model through teacher surveys. Factor analysis has generated a three-factor model in which the organizational healthiness of the school is reflected by the quality of its respective Task, Development and Problem Solving environments, held together by the cultural or social setting (see Figure 2).

The Task environment describes the work-related activities of the school, and its place within the local community and parental views. The Problem Solving environment brings together the ways in which the school deals with work-related problems, while the concept of Development describes how the school as an organization and the teachers as individuals acquire new skills and knowledge.

The evidence from both surveys and an intervention study is that these subjective dimensions buffer or ameliorate the effects of work-related stress on the psychological well-being of the teachers (Cox and Kuk, 1991; Cox et al., in preparation). In other words, the extent to which teachers report adverse psychological or physical symptoms, for instance at the end of term, can be reduced by improvements in the subjective Development, Task and Problem Solving environments. This is in contrast to more traditional approaches to stress management which focus on the individual employees and ignore the impact of the healthiness (or otherwise) of the organization in which they work.

Supervision, educational psychologists and organizational healthiness

The organizational health model has applications to organizations other than schools, and the factorial structure has been further supported by studies of other work-related settings (e.g. the NHS). While we do not yet have empirical data relating to psychological services, the broad framework is likely to apply, although there will clearly be differences in the nature of the activities which define the Task, Development and Problem Solving aspects of the service.

A further difference between the organization of the school (or the hospital) and that of the EPS relates to the nature of the educational psychologist's off-site role. Unlike the teacher, whose own campus and school buildings largely circumscribe and accommodate the teaching activities, staff of the EPS carry out much of their day-to-day work in settings other than their own, for instance in schools or education offices. In carrying out these tasks, the psychologist generally works alone. The ethos, culture, practices and procedures of the school and other settings have to be taken into account by the individual psychologist, who cannot fail to be influenced by them. The EPS may represent a particularly open system.

On the other hand, while a service may be objectively diffuse, as in the range of settings in which staff work, and perhaps the relative infrequency with which they meet collectively as a service, it may not necessarily be open to change. This may be in part due to the historical culture that has evolved. As Hoskins and Morley (1991) point out, "certain rhetorical contexts or relationship settings help people to think in actively open minded ways. Others do not". Another example might be the case in which staff follow routine procedures with little room for discretionary judgement. This could conceivably occur where the imposition of a constrictingly narrow interpretation of the 1981 Act determined and constrained the service's transactions with other systems (e.g. schools, the LEA).

The theme of this issue is the role played by supervision as one of the range of support activities on which the individual educational psychologist may be able to draw. However, this paper has taken a rather different slant, and focused on the healthiness of the organization in order to provide a framework to understand the organizational as well as individual functions of supervision.

The working definition of supervision used for the DECP subcommittee was "A process of examining one's own work and issues arising from it, at a professional and personal level within an individual supervisory relationship" (Osborne, this issue). This relationship involves one other person, who is generally a line manager or colleague within the service. In order to achieve this, the supervisee presents aspects of his or her practice. This provides the opportunity to negotiate an agenda and to clarify the thinking and perceptions surrounding the issues that have been raised. Supervision, therefore, is built round a work-related dialogue which incorporates both the objective and subjective dimensions: what the psychologist does, and how he or she thinks and feels about it. In terms of the earlier discussion of organizational healthiness, this dialogue could, of course, deal directly with (and incorporate) the Task, Development and Problem Solving aspects of the organization.

There is always evidence to support the view that good supervision is seen as empowering by those who have experienced it, and is highly valued by them. Mutual respect between supervisor and supervisee provides a climate for dialogue that enables the real and difficult issues to be confronted. Remembering the transactional model of stress outlined earlier, supervision addresses the supervisee's appraisal or assessment of the difficulties being faced and the individual's appraisal of the resources available to deal with them. As such, good supervision contributes to "direct action" (problem-focused) coping, supporting the individual in dealing with the source of the difficulties.

Supervision also enables the supervisee to raise issues arising from the field, which may affect the ways in which the work is organized and designed, or identify wider service training needs. For instance, an educational psychologist who presents for supervision an assessment which they are reviewing for an Appeal or Judicial Review under the 1981 Act may also be highlighting the need for further training in courtroom skills or legal procedures for all service members.

From an organizational perspective, supervision can provide a tie or match between the objective and subjective levels of the organization, between the various subjective subsystems (i.e. Task, Development), and between the individual psychologist and the organization of the EPS. This supervisory dialogue also maintains the link between what the service sets out to achieve and what happens in practice. Perhaps supervision can be construed as one part of the flux that enables the organization to achieve its tasks and to meet the needs of its internal subsystems. Evidence is emerging from research with schools

that the quality of the fit within and between these dimensions, can predict both the healthiness of the organization and the psychological and physical well-being of the staff. In a well-functioning organization supervision contributes to the development of that fit by the opportunities it provides for joint feedback, support, negotiation and shared problem-solving.

Good quality supervision can be seen as strengthening the service's own positive coping strategies by its contribution to the Task, Development and Problem Solving environments as well as through enhancing the development of the individual member of staff.

Conclusions

Supervision is of course but one of the range of supportive and developmental processes within services. Some of these were studied by the DECP subcommittee and have been written up elsewhere in this journal (see Powell and Pomerantz). Many of these represent various forms of group settings in addition to team meetings, and include area and divisional meetings as well as whole service events. All have the potential for lessening any subjective-objective misfit within the service, or mismatch between the individual and the organization. Poorly managed they may, of course, exacerbate the existing differences. However, as Morley and Hoskins (1991) point out, "How people think collectively depends on how they talk collectively. And how they talk collectively depends on the interpretative practices of the groups to which they belong. These may, or may not, support actively open-minded thinking". This is as true for the process of supervision as it is for induction procedures, appraisal interviews and for larger groupings of colleagues.

Supervision therefore is no panacea for organizational problems. While it may contribute to the healthiness of the system, supervision alone does not bring it about. Indeed, supervision in a climate of distrust or suspicion will be ineffective at both the individual and organizational levels (see the papers in this issue by Pomerantz, Osborne, Powell and Pomerantz, and Kuk and Leyden).

In underlining throughout this paper the importance of the fit or marriage between the subjective and objective dimensions, it follows that any map of the organization which does not take into account both aspects is incomplete. Further, the purpose, tasks and objective elements of the organization provide the focus for the subjective process issues, while the latter provide an understanding of the human dimension of the work. Good quality supervision offers a frame for holding those perspectives simultaneously in view.

The individual educational psychologists are the most important (and expensive) resource of the EPS, and it is therefore imperative to ensure their professional and personal well-being. Problems deriving from the organization of the work (systems and management problems) inevitably spill over into the doing of it. A healthy organization which balances and enhances the subsystems without losing sight of its ultimate purposes is especially important at a time when services and staffing levels are under threat. There is good evidence from the schools literature that a healthy organization can help individual members cope and buffer the effects of such stress on the psychological and physical well-being of the staff.

It follows from this and the other papers in this issue of the journal that psychological services, perhaps more than any other forms of organization, should be aware of the importance of human factors, and of the applications of appropriate psychological research to organizational well-being. The encouraging findings of the organizational health research for schools need replicating within EPSs, not only for the potential benefits for service

development and staff well-being, particularly in these difficult public-sector days, but also to develop our knowledge and skills in respect of systems engineering. For instance, how do we recognize a healthy EPS? How do move our services in that direction? Our credibility as professional psychologists is highly dependent on the extent to which our own system development offers a model of good, evaluated practice. There are opportunities here to enrich our practice through consultation and shared research with our occupational colleagues.

This returns us to one of the main themes of this paper: the healthiness of our profession. How well are we able to provide for our own clients if the services from within which we work do not attend to the needs of their staff? If our services as well as individual members of staff are under stress, shouldn't we be doing something about it?

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