

# If it's not Super, it's not Supervision

## Supporting principals and educational leaders

**Teachers live and work in unprecedented times, Dr John Lee writes. Schools are under considerable pressure, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher shortages and multiple demands from stakeholders.**

Professional supervision offers a regular opportunity for principals and educational leaders to pause, reflect and consider action. The number of principals engaging in supervision is on the rise; however, it remains unknown to many, and subtle barriers can work against leaders accessing this resource.

### What is supervision?

"If it's not a super meeting of visionaries, then it is not supervision," writes educator and professional supervisor Michael Paterson.

Supervision should be an uplifting experience in which the educational leader can reflect on the joys, sorrows, struggles and highlights of their work. What gets discussed in a supervision session is in the hands of the educational leader.

Professional supervision is not line management by the next leader up the ladder or from the employer's representative. The supervision described in this article has nothing to do with performance or management of poor performers by head office.

Similarly, it is not counselling, coaching, therapy, spiritual direction or having a cleansing ale or a glass of vino with a colleague or mentor. Each of these activities are valuable, but they are not supervision.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of myths and ignorance about supervision in our profession. Here is an example of a conversation between a principal and an employer representative:

Principal: "I'd like to engage a professional supervisor to support my reflective practice. This is their name and this is the cost. Are you prepared to pay?"

Employer: "Yes, of course we will pay. [Short pause] I am sorry to hear that you are not coping."

There are some employers who are switched on about supervision. They know principals need support from

someone who is skilled, trained and independent.

Anyone can say 'Come to me for supervision' but beware. Supervision should be by a trained, accredited and ethical professional who is in good standing as a Supervisor within a professional association.

Professional supervision comes in many varieties including clinical and pastoral.

Principals and other education leaders often have some awareness of supervision because the school counsellor or psychologist goes off site for it and the school pays the invoice. This is known as clinical supervision and may involve reflection on difficult 'cases' and how to respond to them.

The professional supervision accessed by principals is not clinical but pastoral. The focus is not on difficult 'cases' but on the principal or educational leader, their wellbeing and reflective practice.

Paterson describes pastoral supervision as the intentional dialogue between soul, role and context.

Supervision supports the soulful living of a role in a particular context.

I know principals who engage in supervision themselves then bring their supervisor to school once a term to offer supervision to members of the leadership team.

Other principals include the leaders of the wellbeing/pastoral team for a day visit each term. This may involve a group supervision session as well as individual sessions. What can happen over time is a deepening in reflective practice, shared vision and maintaining a contemplative stance while better caring for students and staff.

Principals and education leaders frequently find professional supervision a valuable place for confidential dialogue that deepens reflective practice and increases job satisfaction.

### My session

This morning was an early start for me for a supervision session on Zoom with a principal in rural Australia. This highly regarded, experienced principal was referred to me by the head of his employing authority about a year ago. As we wrapped up the session the principal reflected on his insights from our hour and said: "I wish I had engaged a supervisor decades ago."

Principals and educational leaders have a regular time in their calendar that they protect fiercely. Once a month or twice a term they leave school early or close the door and sit down with their professional supervisor, in person or online. It is not for problem counselling, but it is taking an hour to hear their own voice.

In this vital space in their lives, they pause to breathe and consider how soul, role and context are relating in

their life changing work of educating the rising generations.

The positive impacts on individuals and communities are not to be underestimated. The process of supervision nurtures wisdom and forms courageous, prophetic leaders.

### How it works

What does 'super supervision' look like for principals and educational leaders? It should include:

- principal/leader experiences hospitality and unconditional positive regard
- principal/leader and their agenda are at the centre
- supervision is built on relationship, ethics, trust and appropriate confidentiality
- vulnerability is welcomed as a gift
- supervision is a regular event, a meeting of visionary professionals in aid of a wider view
- reflection on the past, in the present to create a better future for the school
- supervision interrupts practice and questions assumptions
- supervision chases insight.

Supervision is not about giving advice, fixing, performance, surveillance or snooping around.

### Finding a supervisor

Principals and educational leaders can find good supervisors via referral and word of mouth. There are registers of trained and accredited professional supervisors including Transforming Practices Inc ([www.transformingpractices.org](http://www.transformingpractices.org) - training involves theory plus 120 hours of supervised practice) and Australasian Association of Supervision (AAOS:

[www.supervision.org](http://www.supervision.org) - theory plus 80 hours of supervised practice).

Members of Transforming Practices are all AAOS Supervisors and have additional experience as part of their Community of Practice.

Skilled professional supervisors come from diverse backgrounds: education, psychology, counselling, chaplaincy, ministry and coaching. While in-person supervision is great, online supervision using Zoom means that distance is no longer a barrier to accessing high quality supervision.

One of the outcomes of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012-2017) was the recommendation that supervision be mandatory for priests and others in pastoral ministry. So there are plenty of tertiary institutions producing pastoral supervisors with sparkling qualifications but as little as 10 hours of supervised professional practice. When seeking a supervisor, look around, do your research, investigate their experience and have a session or two to see if this person is the right one for you.

### Reference

Michael Paterson (2020) *Between a Rock and a Hard Place Pastoral Supervision Revisited and Revised* Independently published

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Read more at: [www.inspiringeducators.com.au](http://www.inspiringeducators.com.au)

