**ESREA Life History and Biography Network**

**Discourses we live by: (How) Do they benefit the world we live in?**

**A supervision service to school leaders in challenging times: “A wonderful learning development opportunity” or a disciplinary practice?**

Abstract:

The paper will draw on an interpretive study which is evaluating a project entitled ‘Supervision: a business service to schools’. The research evaluated the school leaders’ original and developing understanding of the purpose and effectiveness of supervision (XXXX & XXXX, 2015). The evaluation was positive and the expectations were exceeded: as one participant stated, “A wonderful learning development opportunity.” The challenging context will be described and the nature of the supervision service will be outlined, alongside the methodology for the research. Those using the service were/are volunteers and the main benefit was seen as *restorative*, within the concept of the *normative*, *formative* and *restorative* functions of supervision (Inskipp & Proctor, 1993).

Drawing on the work of Foucault, the service will also be examined in terms of the wider discourses that surround the practice. There are power issues here and supervision can be viewed as a confessional practice, discipline at a distance, or what Foucault referred to as a ‘technology of the self’ (1994:87). The paper will question a common sense view that supervision is always a ‘good thing’. It will aim to ‘disturb the tranquillity with which they [social practices] are accepted’ (Barker, 1998: 106). Writing from the perspective of counselling, Feltham reminds us that ‘supervision is at least partly a form of surveillance’ (2002:27). This tension relates to the collaborative enterprise of supervision as being non-judgemental, empowering and supportive, and, in contrast, concerned with standards, monitoring, accountability and, potentially, the disciplining of the participant (XXXX, 2007). There is a danger that supervision, if imposed, can infantilise the supervisee. However, all the participants in the study spoke warmly about the restorative and supportive function of the practice on both a professional and personal level. And yet the service is costly – so who should receive it, how will the employing organisation select the beneficiaries?

There are a number of powerful discourses that shape professional practice. One of these is an instrumental discourse that suggests that ‘getting on with the job’ is paramount, but this shuts out the need to question what that job is: in other words effectiveness measured in targets and outcomes can mask the human costs of this prevailing view. This may conflict with a discourse that promotes work/life balance and the need take care of self in order to take care of others. Such powerful discourses, often in tension, can constitute an institutional *regime of truth*, ‘the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true’ (Barker, 1998:93). Such ‘truths’ need to be examined in the context of the participants’ daily struggles to be omnipotent school leaders. Biographical interviews will be the next step.

Barker, P. (1998) *Michel Foucault: an introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press.

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Inskipp, F. & Proctor, B. (1993) *The art, craft and tasks of counselling supervision, Part 1. Making the most of supervisors*. Twickenham: Cascade.