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# Intervision and professional development: an exploration of a peer-group reflection method in social work education

## Abstract

‘Intervision’, a peer-led group reflection method, was introduced in a teaching partnership between a university and three local authorities to enhance the quality of social work education and support the development of a learning culture across the partnership. A review of the limited international research on Intervision shows almost entirely positive impacts but no studies in social work education. This article reports on research into impacts following the introduction of Intervision sessions for BA and MA social work students. An interpretive, qualitative approach with thematic data analysis of two focus groups with 23 participants was carried out. Findings show that for most students, Intervision offered emotional containment, widened their perspectives and enhanced skills for Intervision. Students identified several positive impacts on their professional development and practice. Reported factors that contributed to students’ varied experience of Intervision sessions and their impact were commitment among participants and facilitators’ ability to model the Intervision process. The context of the teaching partnership was crucial in supporting students to negotiate their learning at the boundary between practice and university. Based on these findings Intervision is

suggested as a useful approach to embed peer-led reflective practice, and open questions for further research are suggested.

## Introduction

A relationship-based practice approach accepts that human behaviour is complex and multi-faceted and entails understanding of both the rational and affective elements that constitute professional relationships. It recognises the interconnectedness of internal and socio-material, external worlds and adopts an integrated holistic approach. In this view, every encounter is unique, and interventions are channelled through the use of self and relationships (Ruch, 2009). It follows that social work cannot be standardised and practice cannot be governed by rules and procedures. Introducing relationship-based practices in organisations requires a move from a compliance to a learning culture (Munro, 2011) in which supervision and "opportunities for peer-learning and discussion" are valued (Laming, 2009:32). It is widely accepted that reflective practice plays a key role in such a culture (Wilson, 2013), and reflective learning is essential for professional development (Munro, 2011). This article discusses the introduction of a reflective practice approach and is of interest to those interested in supporting reflective practice within education and practice.

Following two reviews into social work education in England (Narey, 2014; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014), the government implemented Social Work Teaching Partnerships in 2015, aiming to enhance partnership arrangements between universities and employers; attract more able students; embed the newly published Knowledge and Skills Statements for social workers (DfE, 2014, DoH, 2015); and overall raise the quality of social work practice (Berry-Lound, Tate and Greatbatch, 2016). Our university became a first phase pilot teaching partnership and we strived to develop a learning culture across the three local authorities and the university and introduced among other initiatives the role of Teaching Consultants. These practising social workers co-teach social work students together with academics and support students to make links between theory and practice.

Furthermore, recognising the importance of reflection for learning, the first author initiated the introduction of 'Intervision', a peer-led form of group supervision. Intervision is successfully used in education, work-based CPD and alongside training internationally (Wagenaar, 2015; Lippman, 2013), thus it seemed a feasible method for the creation of reflective spaces across the teaching partnership.

Intervision is a peer consultation process that is carried out in a group, in which participants discuss professional practice issues by following a specified process with distributed and reversible roles (Tietze, 2010). Although relatively well established in continental Europe (Lippmann, 2013), particularly in social work (Tietze, 2010), the method is less known in the UK. The method was applied in both qualifying social work programmes at under- and postgraduate level and in a reflective practice CPD module for qualified social workers with a view to offering participants the knowledge, skills and values to actively engage in peer-led reflective practice sessions in their organisations. The focus of this article is on the implementation of Intervision with final year BA and MA social work students.

It was hoped that students would develop listening and questioning skills, be enabled to integrate their thinking, emotion and practice and develop confidence with peer-group facilitation, which would allow them to continue peer reflection throughout their professional careers. Intervision groups were supported by a lecturer in social work and a teaching consultant. As we cannot assume that the introduction of a method in another context will lead to similar outcomes as previously reported (Beddoe et al., 2016), research was conducted to evaluate the implementation. This research aimed to understand perceived impacts of Intervision sessions for participating students. Student reactions and views on Intervision's value for their professional practice and development were gathered through focus groups and thematically analysed. This evidence allowed the university to make an informed decision about whether and how to continue with this innovation.

Reflective practice approaches in social work are underpinned by different theoretical perspectives (Norrie et al., 2012; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Ruch, 2007a). We agree with Ruch (2009) that reflective approaches for social work education, CPD and practice need to integrate different perspectives and her holistic relationship-based reflective model and Intervision are closely aligned. However, Intervision offers a peer-led dimension that in our view has the potential to facilitate its implementation more widely.

Munro (2011) recommended that the capability for critical reflection explicitly informs social work training and CPD. A key to this is that students and practitioners "learn how to reflect" (Ixer, 2012:80) and therefore educational programmes "have a responsibility to introduce students to reflective and communicative practices" (Ruch, 2007b:378) that allow them to combine "skills, knowledge, and values that are required in practice" (Domakin and Curry, 2018:177). However, while the theoretical differences are explored widely in the literature, the practices of reflection are discussed less (Wilson, 2013). It follows that attention to reflection methods, how social work students learn to use these, and effective means of achieving this, is an important line of enquiry.

This article first presents the findings of a scoping review of the literature on Intervision and reports on the introduction of Intervision on the BA and MA qualifying programmes at our university. The research method is described, and the results are presented and discussed. The conclusion considers the potential value of Intervision as a reflection method in social work education and practice.

## Intervision

Reflection is often promoted as an individual activity in education (Kilminster et al., 2010) but group-based reflective approaches offer enhanced learning opportunities. They harness the potential of wider perspectives (Domakin and Curry, 2018; Staempfli et al., 2016; 2016; Munro, 2011; Fook and Gardner, 2007; Ruch, 2007b); support the development of cooperative capabilities (Beckett, 2009),

emotional resilience and critical thinking skills; and offer containment (Fook et al., 2016; Ruch, 2007a).

Although peer group supervision is not new to social work, a review of group-based reflection models in social work identified four main models (Jones, 2014) with Critical Reflection (Fook and Gardner, 2007) and the Relationship-Based Model (Ruch, 2007a, 2007b) most widely discussed in the UK. The Reclaiming Social Work approach describes meetings between students, social work consultants and academic tutors as a core element of the model (Domakin and Curry, 2018). We intend to add Intervision to this discussion.

Intervision originates from Balint groups (Rüth, 2009) and Structured Group Supervision (Akhurst and Kelly, 2006), which offer the blueprint for all Intervision forms (Tietze, 2010) and is related to Reflecting Teams (Andersen, 1987) and the Relationship-Based Model (Ruch 2007b, 2009). All these models propose the roles of presenter, reflecting team and facilitator and a process that - for most part of the reflective discussion - separates the person presenting a challenge and the participants who reflect on it. However, Intervision differs from the latter two as all roles are rotated among all group participants (Tietze, 2010). Linked to *Super*vision but distinct from it, the term *Inter*vision expresses the peer-led character of the method. In the English literature the terms peer group supervision, - consultation or - counselling are sometimes used synonymously but may not share the above characteristics (Tietze, 2010).

Akhurst and Kelly (2006:4) suggest a continuum of forms of group supervision, as illustrated in figure 1. On this continuum, an interesting shift occurs in relation to the facilitators' and participants' activities: from left to right facilitator or supervisor activity decreases, while participants' active involvement increases.

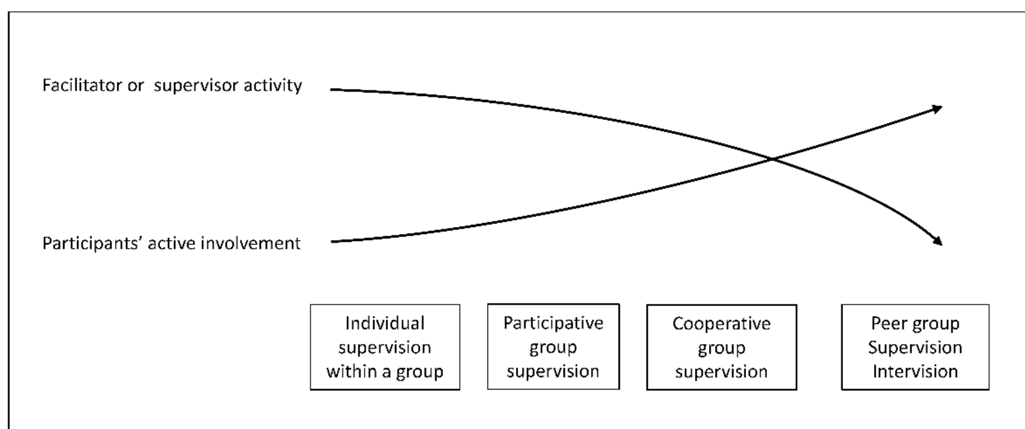


**Figure 1** Facilitators' and participants' activities in various forms of group supervision (adapted from Akhurst and Kelly, 2006:4)

Intervision is a form of group supervision but in contrast to the other forms, it is peer-led, with no (external) expert acting as facilitator (Lippmann, 2013). Intervision is thus defined by the group mode; the process with specified roles; the reciprocity and reversibility of all roles and the focus on professional practice situations (Tietze, 2010).

A usual Intervision process starts with a participant sharing a challenge, followed by a round of clarifying questions by the reflecting team and subsequent identification of a question or focus by the case presenter. The reflecting team then provides feedback by offering hypotheses to which the case presenter then responds (Akhurst and Kelly, 2006). The participants and the case presenter are taking turns with no direct interaction between them (Tietze, 2010). Lastly, an optional discussion period between all participants focusses on the learning of all (Akhurst and Kelly, 2006). This basic process can be applied flexibility, if the principles of separation between presenter and reflectors are observed. The whole process takes one to two hours at the most (Tietze, 2010; Akhurst and Kelly, 2006) and the recommended number of participants varies between four and ten with an average of

six (Lippmann, 2013; Tietze, 2010; Akhurst and Kelly, 2006). Careful consideration of group size and composition is important to ensure sufficient time for each participant to speak and to increase diversity of perspectives (Tietze, 2010).

## *Research on Intervision*

As one author is fluent in English and German, a review of the wider literature in both languages was conducted. ProQuest Social Science and Social Work and Google Scholar were searched using the terms 'Intervision', 'group supervision' or 'peer supervision' and 'research' or 'study' as well as the equivalent German terms ('Intervision', 'Kollegiale Beratung'; 'Forschung' or 'Studie' and 'Soziale Arbeit' or 'Sozialarbeit'). Resultant abstracts from studies from Europe, North America, Africa and Australia were screened and research that did not directly focus on Intervision were excluded. This led to the identification of a doctoral thesis by Tietze (2010) and three studies by Wagenaar (2015), Bailey et al. (2014) and Roy et al. (2014). Tietze's (2010) thesis included a systematic literature review of research published in German or English in which he identified four doctoral theses and five studies from several countries and various professional contexts.

Overall, there is a narrow evidence base for Intervision both in terms of quantity and quality. The relevance of the existing research to social work is limited and we therefore present the available research on Intervision in psychotherapy in Germany (Wagenaar, 2015); rural social work in Australia (Bailey et al., 2014); social work teacher development in Canada (Roy et al., 2014) and a financial leadership development programme in Switzerland (Tietze, 2010). To date there is no research on Intervision in social work education.

Existing research suggests that Intervision is well received, seen as supportive and, so far, almost entirely positive outcomes are reported (Wagenaar, 2015; Roy et al., 2014; Tietze, 2010). Participation in Intervision led to improvements in communication and social skills; positive effects on practice by addressing professional challenges and enhanced professional capability (Tietze,

2010). Intervision facilitates reflection on job roles and the conditions under which these are performed (Roy et al., 2014) and contributes to enhanced social networks and collegial exchange (Wagenaar, 2015; Bailey et al., 2014). Reported outcomes related to emotional wellbeing are decreased occupational strain; reduction in the development of burnout and positive effects on the experience of burnout (Wagenaar, 2015; Tietze, 2010).

There is also tentative research on what supports or hinders effective Intervision. Participants value the focus on professional challenges (Wagenaar, 2015) and the multiple perspectives generated help to overcome one-dimensional thinking and foster inter-professional understanding (Wagenaar, 2015; Bailey et al. et al., 2014). Genuine interest, commitment and motivation are enabling factors (Wagenaar, 2015; Roy et al., 2014) and commitment and reliability in relation to attendance enhances a climate of mutual respect (Wagenaar, 2015). The clear structure is beneficial (Wagenaar, 2015) and the effectiveness of Intervision depends on the extent to which the peer group adheres to time management, taking turns at facilitation and presentation and regular meetings (Tietze, 2010).

Such a shared, distributed and non-hierarchical form of leadership (Fairtlough, 2017) aims to establish a balance between achieving outcomes, group cohesion and power (Lippmann, 2013) and participants experience permanent challenges and disputes as hindering (Wagenaar, 2015). Facilitation skills need to be supported and previous research indicates that a short introduction is sufficient for a seminar framework (Rotering-Steinberg, 2005 and Mayer, 2003 both in Tietze, 2010) with more comprehensive training, including initial facilitation by an external coach who enables the group to work autonomously, being suggested for more complex settings (Proctor, 2008 and Rüegg, 2001 both in Tietze, 2010).

This review of the literature outlines the basic practices of Intervision and previous research. In the following section we will describe in more detail how we have implemented Intervision at our university.

## Introduction of Intervision

Students on the BA and MA in social work programmes take part in reflective group discussions, in which they present and discuss cases from placement. To implement Intervision, lecturers and teaching consultants were offered a training session and students were introduced to the method prior to commencing their seminar groups. The principles of Intervision were explored, the adopted model that includes a note taker to support the case presenter in responding to the ideas and hypotheses generated in the reflection phase (Lippmann, 2013) was presented and guidance for facilitators, case presenters, reflecting teams and note takers was offered. The process followed the common earlier outlined model with two rounds of reflections by the reflecting team. The role of lecturers and teaching consultants was to facilitate the initial reflection sessions and to enable students over the course of the term to take turns at facilitation and case presentation. The aim was to support the students to learn the skills in undertaking this peer-group reflection method.

22 bachelor and 24 master students in their final year were divided into groups within their programme. Groups included students from both adults' and children's pathways plus a lecturer and a teaching consultant. The seminar groups met eight (BA) and nine (MA) times respectively for two hours and usually two cases were discussed.

## Method

To make an informed decision about whether and how to continue with Intervision, we aimed to understand the students' experience of the method. We were interested in hearing their views about the emotional, cognitive and practice related outcomes for them, both as case presenters and participants. We explored their experience of facilitation and the role teaching consultants and lecturers played. We also wanted to gain an insight into their experiences with other reflective

methods and their overall view of Intervision. Therefore, an interpretive, qualitative strategy to data gathering and analysis was employed (McLaughlin, 2012).

We chose to use focus groups as the main data collection method as this was appropriate to elicit multi-faceted and interactive reflections by students on their experiences (Barbour 2007). All final year students (46) who had participated in the Intervision groups were invited to participate and focus groups were held when the final year students were scheduled to come into the HEI at the end of their placement in the spring term 2016. However, not all students attended on the day, and some attendees chose not to participate in the study. Overall, half of the students (23) participated, representing both programmes and all Intervision groups.

The university's ethics committee granted ethical approval and participants were given information about the procedures and purposes of the study, were asked to give written consent and were assured of confidentiality.

Two focus groups, one with BA and the other with MA students, were moderated by experienced social work lecturers, following a semi-structured interview schedule. The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The second author who was not involved in the implementation of the method undertook a thematic data analysis (Whittaker 2012). Based on a preliminary reading of the data and the research aims, she developed initial codes and wrote memos about her responses to the data, coded the transcripts line by line, noted emerging themes, refined the codes and themes and identified pertinent direct quotations. The two authors then reviewed this analysis and the main themes together.

Limitations of this research are related to its small-scale qualitative design in one HEI site and to the self-reported nature of outcomes for students. The findings cannot claim to be generalisable (Barbour, 2007). At the same time, to make an informed decision about the implementation of an internationally recognised method to the teaching partnerships' social work education provision,

this local context is highly relevant. As with all focus groups, despite the facilitators' active encouragement for equal participation, the dynamics of the group may have been influenced by pre-existing relationships between participants (Barbour 2007). We are confident that the experiences of students from both programmes and all Intervision groups were represented but believe that BA students, who did not attend Intervision sessions regularly, may have been underrepresented in the focus group, possibly contributing to a slight overemphasis of positive outcomes. Last, being aware of a possible bias, the first author who initiated the introduction of Intervision at the university and who designed the study, was not involved in the analysis and interpretation of the findings until the very last stage. In the absence of research into the outcomes of Intervision in social work education, this research hopes to contribute to an emerging evidence base and inform the discussion.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings bring together themes that emerged from both focus groups, highlighting similarities and differences between students' experiences and exploring some of the possible reasons for these. Overall, MA students were almost universally extremely positive about their experience of the Intervision sessions. BA students were also broadly positive, but a substantial minority were more critical about the groups' functioning. We drew out four key themes from the data in terms of the students' perceived impact of the Intervision groups: *emotional containment, perspective change, learning how to reflect and professional development across the boundary of university and practice.* These themes are presented and discussed in relation to previous research in the following sections.

### *Emotional containment*

One of the strongest themes to emerge was that Intervision sessions provided a powerful and deep experience of support. Students described them as being 'very helpful' and 'nurturing', so that they 'really enjoyed it' and thought it 'was a good, positive thing'. They talked about the 'non-

judgmental', 'relaxed and safe' space, in which 'a lot of trust' developed that provided 'an opportunity to understand other peoples' feelings' and emotional 'containment'.

> 'There's a beautiful openness and transparency in Intervision, I think, where people are honest, open and emotional.' (MA student)

> 'A space where you can share your ideas and feelings without being judged.' (BA student)

Reflective groups can act as a space in which practitioners' "unthinkable experiences can be processed and made thinkable and manageable" (Ruch, 2007a:675) leading to emotional containment. Emotional containment is a psychoanalytical concept that proposes that relationships afford individuals the potential "to manage their feelings and to integrate thinking and feeling" (Ruch, 2007a:662). This resonates with previously reported outcomes for Intervision in relation to reduction of and coping with occupational strain (Wagenaar, 2015; Tietze, 2010).

Students valued the sense of trust that had developed in the group; one remarking on the 'amazing support' the group gave. Wagenaar (2015) found that a trusting group atmosphere with non-judgemental communication, respect and acceptance and the absence of fear and the feeling of being assessed or controlled supports the creation of a safe space. We argue that these qualities allow emotional containment to emerge in Intervision groups.

Where this is achieved, intensely powerful and experiences can emerge:

> 'I cried for about half an hour when I did my Intervision, it just gave me a kind of space to release my emotion that I kind of kept inside that I didn't feel safe enough to release whilst on placement.' (MA student)

This impactful 'lifesaving' session enabled the student to continue with their placement and indeed their education. Such negotiation of feelings in relation to participants' roles in Intervision groups has been found to sustain motivation (Tietze, 2010) and in the light of issues with retention this seems highly relevant to social work.

However, emotional containment came over less strongly in groups where student attendance and commitment were lower. Previous research reported that commitment and reliability in relation to attendance enhances a climate of mutual respect (Wagenaar, 2015) and that group members' genuine interest and motivation contribute to positive outcomes (Wagenaar, 2015; Roy et al., 2014). Irregular or low attendance diminished the effectiveness of these groups to provide emotional support and containment. Some students expressed dissatisfaction about this and it seems that this was one of the reasons for BA students' overall lower level of satisfaction with Intervision.

### *Perspective change*

Students reported that when the Intervision sessions worked well, they enabled them to challenge assumptions, open up different explanations and perspectives, and change their behaviour in practice situations. Key factors were the diverse contributions, views and experiences of their co-participants:

> 'It gave me such wider spectrum … and opened so many other doors which I wouldn't necessarily think about … because we are all different we all approached it differently.' (MA student)

One student gave an example of how the process of stepping away from the group following their presentation and listening to the reflections of the group had helped them to gain a different perspective on their practice. Others felt that the Intervision process enabled them to appreciate the importance of critical reflection on key issues rather than focusing on the specific details of a situation:

> 'the person who sat out and couldn't speak when everyone else was hypothesising or thinking, they struggled often not to answer the questions. I think that was good and I think that …. it was kind of nice to have that uncertainty and those gaps because it makes you realise that those details maybe weren't as important as you thought they were.' (BA student)

Several students felt that being in the presenter role helped validate their own responses to the work and boosted their self-confidence:

> ‘It was very affirming as an experience - you weren’t just being sensitive or incompetent and that this was a really challenging situation. I think that was confidence boosting as well as giving practical tips.’ (BA student)

Some students gained a critical perspective on practice in their placement settings and were supported to navigate difficulties in a different way so that one MA student ‘felt way better about my placement after I did the presentation’.

Adhering to the roles and processes is crucial to the effectiveness of Intervision (Tietze, 2010) and the benefit of this is illustrated in the above examples. It seems that not only can Intervision support the generation of multiple perspectives but also allows the presenter to perceive and hear these by not being able to join in the discussion.

Students reported that the Intervision sessions helped them to think about emotional and relationship-based components of the work and enhance their empathy for service users. One BA student described this as being able to re-connect with the emotional world of service users; something that was easy to forget when inhabiting a ‘day-to-day business’ mentality.

> ‘I was really struck by the participants in the group, their ability and willingness to um… to tolerate talking about feelings it wasn’t just about saying this is what’s happening and this is the circumstances but you could talk about how it was making you feel and often they would themselves would reflect upon their own feelings.’ (BA student)

The generation of multiple perspectives is a key theme and outcome of these Intervision sessions and indeed has been shown to support overcoming one-dimensional thinking, which in turn enables collegial exchange (Wagenaar, 2015; Bailey et al., 2014).

However, a minority of students from the BA programme questioned the benefit of the Intervision groups because 'it's like I didn't get any concrete answer about what I'm doing … most people don't know much about my team.' (BA student). Another student stated that:

> 'I found it hard um to engage, to contribute as much, when people … adult services presented … because I didn't expect to know the legislations as much around it and I didn't know what services were available. It kind of came from a place of less knowledge.' (BA student)

These students valued the knowledge that comes from participation in a specific setting with attendant procedures and legislation, or ways of doing things and therefore seemed to believe that if they, or a fellow student, did not have experience of a setting or service user group then they would be less likely to be able to provide any useful input. We hypothesise that these students have what could be described as a more procedural practice worldview, which may have restricted how they perceived the purpose and value of Intervision. Perhaps these students' "current understanding can present obstacles to achieving [a] more complex or comprehensive understanding" of the professional self and of practice (Dall'Alba and Sandberg, 2006:396). However, in our view a focus on individuals alone cannot explain this, as the practices within universities and workplaces are important factors that support perspective change. Universities need to ensure that they consider how participants understand practice and adapt their curriculum design, assessment of learning, evaluation strategies and learning environments accordingly (Dall'Alba and Sandberg, 2006). Social work organisations on the other hand need to consider how workplace practices "shape the shared understanding of what the service is for and about", particularly because many are "heavily driven by procedural understandings of what social work practice should be" (Forrester et al., 2018:187). If a perspective change on "understanding of, and in, practice is to be promoted as part of professionals' work, the workplace must encourage critical reflection on practice in a manner that enhances this understanding" (Dall'Alba and Sandberg, 2006:404). Rather than focussing on

supervision alone as is customary, perhaps, a whole systems' focus on "a more diverse range of support options", including peer supervision, "might provide a degree of both emotional and professional support" needed to promote professional development (Wilkins, 2017:15).

### *Learning how to reflect*

For those students who had experienced previous case discussion groups that did not follow a specific method, there was a clear preference for the Intervision model. Key aspects that they valued were its clear structure and the ways this encouraged everybody's participation.

Many students identified that learning how to use this method had beneficial impacts on their professional development. A consensus emerged that it helped them develop new skills and knowledge and gain confidence in facilitating and contributing to critical reflection groups. Students talked about how reflections continued for some after the session:

> 'It really helped me to self-reflect' (BA student)

At first some students had found it difficult to understand the rationale for the model. They acknowledged an initial reluctance to take on the different roles in the Intervision process such as presenter, facilitator and note taker, however, despite this, recognised that rotating the different roles provided a valuable learning experience and was a necessary component for the effective functioning of the groups.

University-based lecturers and teaching consultants from practice who co-worked well and positively modelled how to ask questions and formulate hypotheses, contributed considerably to students' learning about the method. As one student put it:

> 'At the start of the session when people were struggling to frame a question to put to the group…they [the teaching consultant and the lecturer] helped frame that question… I'd say that was a really good strong contribution from both of them' (BA student)

Students described being able to learn both from undertaking the various roles and from observing what others did. Learning arose from observations of both good practice and from observing what did not work so well. The familiarity with the process and development of questioning and listening skills over time led to an improved experience of Intervision:

> 'As we became familiar and became more confident doing it, it seemed to become more fluid.' (BA student)

The Intervision process is known to support participation (Wagenaar, 2015) and for many students the participative peer-led character of Intervision enabled them to gain confidence in facilitating and contributing to reflection groups.

However, one student acknowledged that their insufficient understanding of and commitment to the Intervision sessions had prevented them from gaining maximum benefit, which was a source of regret. Others agreed that learning how to apply the model and developing the necessary skills and confidence were inhibited when students demonstrated a lack of commitment or there was low attendance.

While some student facilitators and one teaching consultant struggled with the role and espoused different levels of skill, overall it seems that for these seminars, the introduction of the method and the initial facilitation offered by the teaching consultants and lecturers was sufficient, confirming previous research (Rotering-Steinberg, 2005 and Mayer, 2003 both in Tietze, 2010).

### *Professional development across the boundary of university and practice*

A key theme in the students' accounts concerned their professional development across the boundary between practice and academia. Students talked about how their development of skills and confidence in relation to engaging in Intervision sessions would be useful in practice and referred to becoming more capable of picking out pertinent factors when presenting a case in the workplace; improving the capacity to think freely and not to censor one's ideas at the outset;

learning helpful ways of opening up professional conversations and stimulating divergent and curious thinking; and understanding more about and challenging one's own habitual professional behaviours, emotional responses and ways of thinking. The following student described having learned:

> '… ways to challenge without being confrontational and to talk to people in an effective way rather than trying to ignore something and feeling uncomfortable with it.' (MA student)

Furthermore, when groups worked well, students were able to not only see things differently but also see how they could change their behaviour in practice situations:

> '… how I was working with that person and that was the big take-away-home for me, actually how I worked with that person probably changed.' (BA student)

The Intervision sessions supported some students to negotiate difficult situations in their practice placement. They used the sessions to reflect on relationships with practice educators and colleagues and to critically reflect on professional cultures in the workplace:

> 'I think that you can be more honest at uni - because you can bring up cases and dilemmas that you had with your practice educator.' (BA student)

That Intervision has positive outcomes because of its focus on practice issues had been discussed before (Wagenaar, 2015), but students further appreciated the opportunity to talk about wider issues:

> 'You also reach conclusions that weren't about the presentations - they're about social work, about life, about work-life.' (MA student)

These wider critical reflections were not normally discussed in their individual supervision sessions with their practice educators, which usually focussed exclusively on case work. While such wider benefits have been identified in a previous small-scale study (Roy et al., 2014), our findings perhaps more strongly indicate a positive impact of Intervision in this regard.

A key benefit of the sessions was to bring together the two worlds of the academy and practice, which sometimes felt too disparate:

> ‘A bit of practice meets theory…otherwise we’re here or we’re there and it was the only opportunity where those two really came together, and it felt great.’ (MA student)

The role of the teaching consultants in providing this bridge was crucial. Students highly valued ‘the experience and knowledge that [they] brought’ into the university and they were seen as ‘a really strong contribution’ with one student saying they had ‘the most amazing facilitator’. Students valued ‘that they were with us the whole time, devoting that level of resource to us was just amazing’. Some teaching consultants provided information about relevant resources and reading, and another invited the students to conduct the final session in a room with a one-way mirror, which gave the students an invaluable experience.

The coming together of the different perspectives of practice and academia, espoused by the lecturer and teaching consultant and supported through additional resources resonates strongly with research on the Frontline approach (Domakin and Curry, 2018). However, for one group of students the role of the teaching consultant in modelling the method was less valued:

> ‘The teaching consultant umm they obviously didn’t have the experience of it, it felt like we sort of maybe made a little bit of our own version’ (BA student)

One important factor in the students’ responses was the degree to which their practice placement had offered them opportunities for reflection. For those students that had limited reflective spaces in their placement the Intervision sessions filled a vital gap and offered permission to be vulnerable and uncertain, which according to one student would have led to her being labelled as not coping in her placement. Those who had more extensive opportunities for critical reflection in placement saw Intervision sessions as a useful complement. Students in this position stated that these sessions had enhanced their capacity to use, contribute to and evaluate the reflective practice in their placement.

These students said that they needed the Intervision sessions less and expressed fewer regrets at their ending.

## Conclusion

Our review of the English and German literature on Intervision found that several terms are used to describe Intervision, which is further complicated by a multitude of reflective group methods (Akhurst and Kelly, 2006). This presents a challenge for both practice and research. We think the five criteria described by Tietze (2010) (peer-led group; no external facilitator; specified roles; reciprocity of all roles and focus on professional practice situations) offer a definition that has the potential to support both practice and (comparative) research as they offer clarity on the essential practices involved. In addition, we have concluded that the term Intervision is useful, as it expresses the peer-led character with a term that is transferable across many languages, national and professional contexts and links directly to the discourse on supervision in social work.

Overall these findings indicate that for most students Intervision offered emotional containment, widened their perspectives and enhanced skills that gave them the confidence to partake in Intervision. These sessions had a positive self-reported impact on the students' professional development and practice. Importantly, the context of the teaching partnership with teaching consultants and lecturers collaborating was crucial in supporting students to negotiate their learning at the boundary between practice and university. However, we also found that self-perceptions of the impact of Intervision on students' professional understanding and practice varied.

Attendance and commitment among participants and lecturers' and teaching consultants' ability to model Intervision roles were the main factors that influenced students' experience of Intervision sessions and their impact. Good attendance and positive commitment combined with good

facilitation led to the emergence of a safe learning space with better reported outcomes for students.

Overall these findings support the positive impacts shown previously in international research on Intervision in practice settings. Although previous research stemmed from other practice fields, this study provides similar findings for social work education. It thus offers a tentative evidence base for Intervision in social work education, albeit in the context of a teaching partnership in England.

The generally positive response by students to the introduction of this structured reflection method contributed to our decision to continue to use Intervision. The research provided useful feedback about the practical organisation of the Intervision groups. Based on these findings we suggest that Intervision offers a useful approach that, after some initial training, helps to embed reflective practice within university settings. It thus offers a useful response to previous calls for the development of critical reflection capability (Munro, 2011) by supporting students to learn how to reflect (Ixer, 2012) following a specified method (Wilson, 2013; Ruch, 2007a).

This study demonstrates the value of reflection, especially for those students that do not have adequate reflective opportunities in practice. However, this is not just an issue for students and equally applies to qualified practitioners who may not receive reflective supervision (Beddoe et al., 2016; Manthorpe, et al., 2015). Perhaps, enabling social workers at all levels to engage in Intervision could offer such opportunities adjacent to traditional supervision (Wilkins, 2017). In recent years, reflective groups have become established in some social work practice approaches (Domakin and Curry, 2018) and there is some evidence that "traditional supervision is in transition and peer group supervision is being used to discuss practice issues" (Vito, 2015:162). However, where this is not the case, we propose that Intervision is a reflection method that could potentially contribute to collaborative reflective learning.

The findings also indicate caution. We found few specific examples of how the Intervision sessions had enabled students to integrate theories and research with practice, although the coming together of practice and theory was an expressed benefit of Intervision. We suggest that perhaps, Intervision does not sufficiently enable this and one reason for this may be that Intervision discussions are largely based on practice wisdom and prior knowledge of participants. Perhaps additional reflective learning methods are required to support more explicit weaving together of different types of knowledge.

It is of course a problematic endeavour to review research across national, organisational and professional boundaries. We believe that the inclusion of research published in more than one language has opened up perspectives and we have identified some common threads. The current evidence base from a range of settings indicates Intervision's positive potential for the promotion of professional development but requires further research.

Based on our study, we think it may be worth considering how participants' world views influence the perceived value and impact of Intervision. Intervision relies not only on the implementation of a method in a technical-rational sense, but also depends on the world view of participants and organisations (Ruch, 2007a). Our study raises questions about what contributes to some social work students' more 'procedural' understanding of practice, as a minority of our participants demonstrated, and how these students could be assisted to broaden their understanding of and perspectives on practice. Research thereby needs to focus on both individual aspects and on educational and organisational practices.

Lastly, Intervision is associated with self-managed, non-hierarchical organisational forms that have achieved substantial reductions in bureaucracy (Vito, 2015; Laloux, 2014). For example, Buurtzorg, a nursing home care provider in the Netherlands uses Intervision as part of their learning and self-management strategy for teams (Laloux, 2014) and "the organization provides space for them to critically think and act autonomously" (White, 2016:7). Such peer-led organisational forms could

contribute positively to a much needed refocus on professional autonomy that needs to go hand in hand with a reduction in bureaucracy (Munro, 2011). Intervision groups could thus create spaces to experience a degree of self-management, peer-led reflection and decision-making.

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