The development of peer reflective supervision amongst nurse educator colleagues: An action research project

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ABSTRACT

This action research study developed the use of peer reflective supervision (PRS) amongst eight nurse educators contributing to an undergraduate Adult Nursing programme at a UK University.

During the academic year (2013–14), nurse educator co-researchers met for an introductory workshop and then met regularly in pairs to facilitate each other's reflection. This provided an opportunity for nurse educators to reflect on identified issues linked to their role with a facilitative peer. Educators met three additional times in a Reflexive Learning Group (RLG), to gather data on their use of PRS. Audio-recordings from the RLGs were transcribed and analysed using Norton's (2009) thematic analysis framework. Co-researchers iteratively validated the data and an external validation group critically viewed the evidence.

Overall, seven themes were generated from the three research cycles. These were: PRS as a Valuable Affirming Experience; Time Issues; Facilitation- Support, Trust and Challenge; Developing a Flexible 'Toolbox'; To Write or Not to Write; Drawing on Literature; and Requirement for Action.

Findings add new evidence regarding use of a flexible toolbox of resources to develop reflection and offer practical guidance on the development of PRS. Nurse educators often experienced similar concerns, and a facilitative supervision structure allowed co-researchers to positively explore these. Recognition of work pressures and requirement for time and space for reflection was highlighted, particularly regarding writing, and exploring the literature, to develop critical analysis of experiences. The importance of action as part of the reflective process was emphasised. Co-researchers reported positive personal change as well as the opportunity to highlight issues through their reflection for further action within the organisation.

The study adds constructive evidence for the use of reflection to explore professional work, make sense of experiences and develop positive action. It has transferability to a wider international audience interested in the development of reflection amongst colleagues and the use of insider research techniques to challenge and develop practice.

1. Background

Considerable importance is given to both reflection and clinical supervision within the nursing profession (Care Quality Commission, 2015; Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2011; Brunero and Stein-Parbury, 2008). Reflection involves a process of searching for solutions to practice experiences, in order to make sense of them (Bulman et al., 2012). Through exploring experiences and making sense of them, learning can be achieved and changes made. This is connected with a professional motivation to 'move on' and 'do better' within practice in order to learn from experience and critically examine 'self' (Bulman et al., 2012, Jasper, 2006). Clinical supervision has been described as a practitioner reflecting on their own practice with support from a skilled supervisor within a practice-focused professional relationship (Winstanley and White, 2003). The three main functions of clinical supervision are: normative-

to enhance professional accountability, formative-to develop skills and knowledge and restorative-to facilitate collegial and supportive relationships (Proctor, 1986). Brunero and Stein-Parbury (2008) showed that clinical supervision provided peer support and stress relief, and promoted professional accountability, skill and knowledge development. They suggested the primary cognitive function of clinical supervision is reflection or thinking back in order to develop understanding of practice and to learn from experience.

This study involved combining these concepts of supervision and reflection in order that nurse educators could develop a way to facilitate each other to reflect on their roles. Whilst undergraduate nurse education at the University had always utilised and developed reflective education since the inception of its programmes (Bulman, 2013), it had not harnessed the associated potential of PRS for nurse educators in order to help them to learn from their education practice. Importantly, if educators advocate and promote the use of reflection amongst student and practice colleagues, then it could be argued that they ought to be developing ways in which they can become more reflective themselves, and

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investigate how this can be used to enhance their roles (Minott, 2010, Brookfield, 2005; Jay and Johnson, 2002). The study also fitted with the university strategy for enhancing the student experience. This advocates that all academic staff who support learning should engage with processes of evaluation, reflection and research into pedagogic practice. The assumption in this study was that because of their roles, educators were able to offer the skills of facilitation to each other and thus cultivate a more reciprocal reflective supervision, than traditionally advocated in clinical supervision. This meant that the process of PRS had the potential to develop educators' roles because it offered a route through which they could learn with, and from, each other.

2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study was to explore peer reflective supervision (PRS) amongst educator colleagues in order to determine its potential to inform their roles within undergraduate nurse education. The principal objectives were to:

- explore how PRS could be used by nurse educators to critically consider their roles and develop as reflective practitioners;
- develop a process of PRS with potential to contribute to improved teaching/facilitation.

3. Design

The philosophical approach was that of social construction, whereby people are deemed to make sense of their experience through constructions of meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). It was through this lens that an action research approach was taken where researchers brought their own prior knowledge, values and beliefs to the process of enquiry; it was this, plus the research data, that constructed the research outcomes (Day et al., 2002).

Action Research involves professionals carrying out research into their own practice. This embraces the notion of doing research 'for' and 'with' people rather than 'on' people, thus it has a different philosophical stance from more traditional research approaches. Accordingly, co-researchers became personally involved in the research, investigated issues relevant to their situation and generated findings that were implemented and owned by them (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010).

Action research involves finding ways to improve practice but also to theorise about it (Friedman and Rogers, 2009; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). The rationale behind the process of action research involves bringing about change towards maintainable and democratic outcomes and the promotion of social justice (McIntosh, 2010; Hilsen, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). As such, data collection was an evolutionary process as co-researchers worked together to set agendas, collect data and control the use of the outcomes (McIntosh, 2010).

4. Setting and Participants

The setting was a UK university. The eight co-researchers were all experienced, qualified Senior Lecturers contributing to a pre-registration, Adult Nursing undergraduate degree programme within a Faculty. All were familiar with the concept and use of reflection, as it was fundamental to teaching and learning on the programme.

5. Methodology and Methods

The lead researcher for the project sought expressions of interest from colleagues to ascertain whether the project would attract co-researchers. Those interested were sent a detailed letter explaining the project. Written consent was sought and co-researchers met for a preparatory workshop. This enabled them to plan how PRS would be approached and to collaborate in organising data collection, analysis and validation.

Co-researchers aimed to meet regularly in pairs (2 or more times within each cycle), for up to 2 hours, for PRS sessions over the academic year. Co-researchers' experiences, working hours and skills were considered to achieve compatible matches between pairs. Each pair facilitated each other in providing reflective supervision, within the university setting. A 'toolbox' of resources was provided for everyone to try out, report back on, and develop over the course of the study; including ideas for ground rules (Fig. 1) and suggestions for reflective frameworks and writing (Fig. 2).

Researchers kept private diaries following their supervision sessions and selected what excerpts they would use from these to inform discussions in the 3 Reflexive Learning Groups (RLGs). This selection process was essential to allow co-researchers to keep aspects of their supervision private that they did not wish to share within the larger group. Within these RLGs, data collection took place regarding experiences and plans for action, as PRS progressed (See Fig. 4 for key actions within each cycle.). It was these experiences and plans that constituted the data. Co-researchers discussed and agreed ground rules for the conduct and recording of RLGs. Audio recordings from these sessions were transcribed.

The lead researcher generated an initial analysis of each of these RLGs, plus further more detailed thematic analysis. Norton's (2009) framework for thematic analysis within action research was used for this. There was immersion in the data as transcripts were read and re-read, categories were generated, deleted or merged after each cycle.

Co-researchers contributed to and validated these analyses. This allowed them to critically respond to issues and discussion points for further action in line with action research. In all, three cycles of action and analysis took place. Finally, co-researchers met to discuss categories and themes and validate what had been learnt from the study overall. In conjunction with this, a validation group of two other faculty members educated to doctoral level was sought in order to critically view the final themes and evidence (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). The overall design provided a way for co-researchers to address the research aim and objectives.

5.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. All co-researchers signed a consent form and were free to leave the project at any time. Co-researchers were peers and none occupied a management position, thus there were no unequal power relationships between people. Co-researchers agreed to the use of pseudonyms for quotes from the data within published findings.

5.2. Trustworthiness

Credibility – The validation group was used to critically view the evidence. The lead researcher met with a 'critical friend', experienced in action research, to discuss the project plans regarding appropriate methodology and practical organisation (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). All co-researchers were actively reflexive regarding the development of the research and fed back via the RLG meetings.

Transferability - Detailed data were collected and underpinned by action research theory. Norton's (2009) framework was used to thematically analyse the data.

Dependability - peer validation of data was built in through the RLGs, reflexivity and the use of a validation group.

Confirmability – A clear description of the study shows the decisions made, and findings derive from the research data. (Guba and Lincoln, 1981).