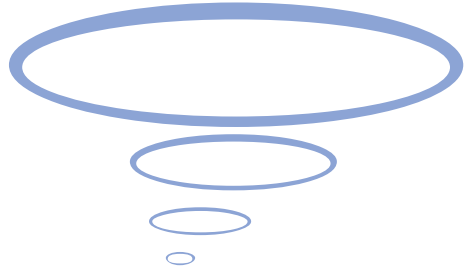


THINKING SPACE



Reflective Practice Meets Youth Work Supervision

Margo Herman

Abstract:

Supervisors are essential to nurturing organizational and employee success in the field of youth work. Supervisors who take the time to incorporate a reflective practice and critical inquiry approach to supervision may deepen positive change in their youth work practice as well as the relationship with those they supervise. This article identifies the concepts of reflective practice, critical inquiry and action research, then proposes a framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice in a youth work context, and analyzes the benefits of this approach. The framework was developed during a year long National Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship in the U.S. in 2010.

Key words: Reflective Practice, Youth Work Supervision, Action Research, Critical Inquiry, Leadership Skills in Youth Work.

SUPERVISING YOUTH workers is a challenging, demanding job within a complex field of work. Supervisors who take the time to incorporate a reflective practice and action research approach to supervision of youth workers can deepen the impact of their work. This article offers insights into the value of linking reflection, critical inquiry and action research with supervision practices and proposes a practical framework for youth work supervisors to consider for supporting youth work staff. The framework is intended to percolate some new perspectives for youth work supervisors to consider since there is little applied research or literature available about this subject.

McNamara, Lawley and Towler (2007-08: 81) note that supervision is a powerful tool for addressing youth worker stresses, providing potential to assist organizations in valuing staff and helping them keep focus on the young people at the heart of the youth work enterprise. In the United States, the current thinking about youth worker preparation does little to ensure that staff have the

supervision and support to handle the complexity of their jobs. In contrast to other professions, ‘... youth workers are too frequently recruited quickly and “dropped” into situations without adequate preparation or supervision’ (Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2008: 11). Christian and Kitto (1987) look at the history of supervision and emphasize the need for it in youth work but state that it is often not well established. They define supervision as both a working practice and a relationship where advice is not given but the worker is enabled to explore their situation and reach their own decisions. In her comprehensive book that covers all aspects of supervision within a youth work context, Tash (1967) identifies several phases of the supervisory relationship ranging from ‘getting to know each other’, to a short phase of ‘dependency’, to a time where the worker is able to reflect and problem-solve independently without supervision. In the US literature, Kadushin and Harkness (2002) emphasize the importance of supervision in social work. They outline the supervisor’s role as ‘administrative, educational and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisee in the context of a positive relationship’ (2002: 23). Kadushin and Harkness provide an overview of these administrative, educational and supportive processes as well as outlining the potential advantages and problems to the supervisor/supervisee relationship. They stress the importance of the supervisor’s role in delivering the best service to clients although having no direct contact with them. This article draws on the basic principles of supervision and develops the assertion that supervisors who blend and extend knowledge and skills about personnel management with knowledge and skills about critical inquiry and reflective practice will offer a perspective instrumental to empowering their staff.

Although the literature on critical inquiry does not specifically address youth work, evidence exists that habits of reflection and inquiry contribute to quality practice in teaching. Critical inquiry as described by Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (2001) suggest an inquiry approach to teaching where novices and experts co-create learning and teaching by merging their perspective through collaborative analysis. When teachers and students engage through inquiry, a mutual form of knowledge evolves. The culture of inquiry allows assumptions and common practices to be questioned, data collection defined, and alternatives considered (Cochrane-Smith, 2001: 53-54). Underlying assumptions are challenged and valued in this approach.

Reflective practice invites supervisors to explore difficult or unique youth work experiences with surprise, puzzlement, or positive confusion. As they reflect on the phenomenon before them, they may choose to think through and carry out an experiment which generates both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (Schön, 1983: 68). When this kind of reflective practice is combined with the previously stated approach to inquiry, the potential for a deeper understanding of youth work issues holds promise for new perspectives to emerge.

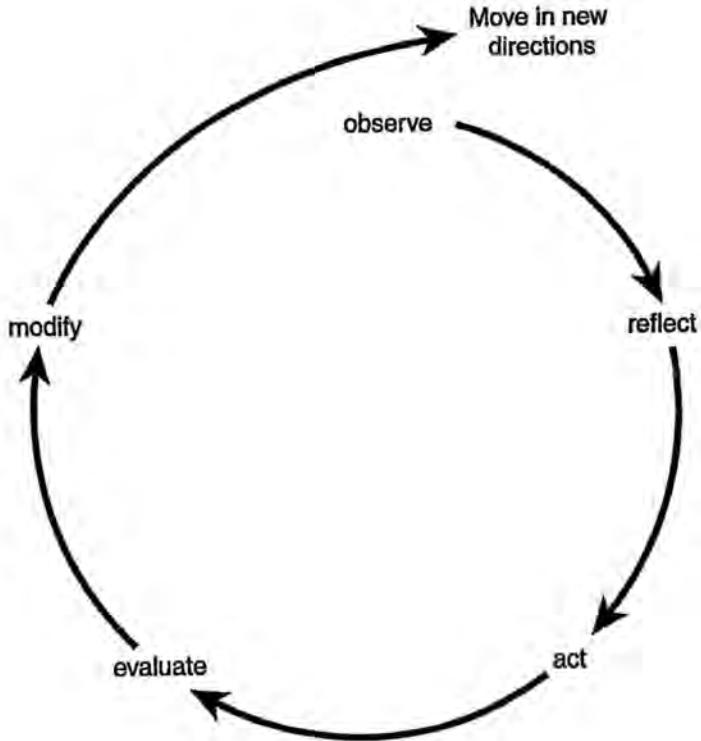
Supervisors who choose a mode of inquiry, invite and engage with supervisees to understand issues and explore assumptions. They may add in tools of action research to enable the team to

actually investigate and evaluate their work, and create new possibilities for action. Those who engage in action research ask;

What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?' Their accounts of practice show how they are trying to improve their own learning and influence the learning of others. These accounts come to stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn if they wish (McNiff, 2006: 7).

This combination of reflection, critical inquiry and action research becomes powerful. There is momentum in the youth work field to infuse the preparation and practice of youth workers with reflection and inquiry in the belief that these will strengthen the knowledge base, improve practice and broaden the voices that inform policy (Hill, 2009). Using the critical tensions and questions within youth work practice in a reflective inquiry context can help illuminate new approaches to supervision .

The proposed *Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice* (Figure 2) was crafted using these reflective inquiry tools as I participated in the *National After School Matters Practitioner Fellowship* in 2009-2010. The fellowship is based on goals for afterschool professionals to 'support a community of practitioners to study effective practices...and disseminate and share program improvement strategies' (Hill, 2009: 47). As afterschool professionals in the fellowship engaged in conversations about reflective practice and critical inquiry, I had the opportunity to indirectly observe the potential for youth work supervisors to transform relationships between supervisors and supervisees by using these tools. Although the fellowship experience did not provide a classic research context, it did provide the opportunity to collect qualitative stories from youth work supervisors about dilemmas where a reflective practice approach might enhance the process of supervision. These supervisors had a desire to transform some of the challenges of supervising by reflectively identifying and responding to issues without anticipating or prescribing outcomes. They encouraged an enhanced involvement and shared perspective between supervisors and supervisees to ultimately impact young people. This approach can be transformative and provide a fertile launching ground for dynamic application of McNiff's Action Reflection cycle (Figure 1) (McNiff, 2006: 8,9).

Figure 1: McNiff Action Reflection Cycle

This cycle promotes moving in new directions by building upon investigation and observations to reach new actions. The steps include:

- **observing** what is going on,
- **identifying** a concern,
- **reflecting** to move forward with a given concern,
- **taking action** to try out a new way,
- **evaluating** data about what is happening, and
- **modifying** the plan as a result of what is discovered.

With both critical inquiry and reflective practice infused in this action-reflection cycle, the framework (Figure 2) begins to unfold. Critical inquiry encourages supervisors and supervisees to construct joint knowledge about day to day events, norms and practices; reflection allows for puzzlement; confusion and uncertainty are condoned as a means to enhance mutual understanding. As stated earlier, the combination becomes powerful.

A Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice

The Framework (figure 2) was developed with qualitative input from three groups of youth work supervisors to improve practices and advance knowledge for youth work. Group one comprised youth work supervisors who participated in focus groups in 2009 to provide input for a University of MN Center for Youth Development workshop called Leadership Matters (n=19). Group two involved Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship participants who were learning and applying reflective practice and critical inquiry skills in 2010 (n=11). Group three consisted of youth work supervisors who registered as Leadership Matters workshop participants in 2010 (n=22).

The Framework encourages reflection through action research with the intent to improve practices and to advance knowledge about how things can be done and why (McNiff, 2006:8). The concepts of reflective practice blended with qualitative data (stories and experiences) from the above sample lead to the five sequential steps identified in Figure 2 Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice. The value of this approach lies in the fact that frameworks for youth work supervisors to consider for bringing reflective practice to their specific work context are scarce.

FIGURE 2: Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice

Suggested Approaches to Reflective Practice in a Youth Work Supervision Context

1: *Assess and analyze youth work practice outside of your own organization* by reading field research, seeking practitioner stories, and connecting with a peer network. 2: *Conduct data collection* by applying qualitative data and action research tools through intentionally observing staff over a course of time; and interviewing staff to create an enhanced openness and understanding about the dilemmas, tensions and stresses experienced by youth work staff. 3: *Identify themes and reflect upon the issues* that emerge from the analysis and research to illuminate issues to be addressed with staff. 4: *Incorporate the issues and themes identified into staff interactions* such as staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, or learning circles for internal staff development. 5: *Coach and mentor staff individually* discussing and strategizing based on the themes, dilemmas and issues that emerge.

Approach 1: Assess and analyze youth work practice outside of your organization by reading field research, seeking practitioner stories, and connecting with a peer network.

There is value in discovering research and practitioner stories from the broader field of youth development to foster ideas that elevate a supervisor's viewpoint above the day to day busyness. Youth work journals and newsletters are more frequently featuring supervisory practices within

youth work organizations. National and international youth work sources such as Harvard Family Research and Forum for Youth Investment have recently published journal articles on the subject. These types of publication keep researchers and practitioners on the forefront of the youth work field through the sharing of practitioner stories.

As an example, a recent article entitled *Shining A Light on Supervision* (Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, and Craig, 2010) features exemplary youth work supervision practices. The authors observe:

We are poised to learn a lot in the coming years about how to strengthen on-the-job supports for youth workers in ways that improve practice and reduce turnover. This is a very positive development.... When we compared satisfied youth workers with their dissatisfied peers, only one significant difference emerges in their profiles: satisfied workers were more likely to report getting the feedback they needed to do their job.... Some differences in practice may come down to whether someone is fortunate to have a good supervisor (Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010: 1-2).

Taking time to seek out practice stories deepens the perspective of youth work supervisors and brings forth a new understanding melded with academic learning about effective supervision. There is value in the collective knowledge of novice and expert, academic and practitioner collaborating to inform youth work practice. Formal knowledge (scholars) and practical knowledge (practitioners) can build 'local knowledge' collaboratively (Cochrane-Smith, 2001: 51). Drawing attention to the blending of field research and practitioner stories may change the way we regard and provide professional development in youth work supervision.

Approach 2: Conduct data collection; learn and apply qualitative analysis and action research inquiry tools.

Collecting qualitative data is helpful to spark new action strategies within an organization. As in many areas of research, the youth work profession is acknowledging the value of qualitative data drawn from fieldwork; this kind of data helps to bridge research into practice and vice versa. Qualitative methods encourage gathering multiple data sources as an observer collecting field notes from open ended interviews, direct observations, and written documents. The data for qualitative analysis typically comes from fieldwork where the researcher makes firsthand observations of activities and interactions (Patton, 1990: 10).

This approach illuminates issues and concerns based on the observations and interviews. The collection of this type of data typically involves recording observations of youth and youth workers in action, and interviewing staff about the interactions and dynamics of day-to-day work with

youth. The issues that emerge from the collected data form part of the action reflection cycle that creates potential for practice changes. Looking back at collective observation notes and interviews over an extended period of time helps illuminate the issues and dilemmas. There is importance in viewing the observations from a macro level, beyond a particular incident or crisis. This requires standing back and regarding the data from a broader perspective and context. As Ron Heifetz teaches in his leadership classes at Harvard:

Imagine...you are on a dance floor, swept up in the dance, an active participant in a complex scene. There are some things about the dance that you will only know by actually dancing. But if you move to the balcony for awhile, you can see things that you can never discover on the dance floor – the larger pattern of interactions of which you are a part. You gain perspective and can make new choices (Parks, 2005: 50).

There are many types of interviews and ways of observing. Casual observations recorded over a period of weeks and months without much focus on analyzing the meaning at the time can be valuable when viewed collectively with higher level balcony perspective that helps identify themes and issues. Recording observations regularly over the course of time (three months, six months, whatever time frame is useful), allows for quick and unobtrusive entries to be made that can be analyzed farther down the road at the end of the observation course. There is no need to spend too much time analyzing as you record the entries; the issues will emerge within. The quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent upon the interviewer (Patton, 1982: 161). How you ask questions is essential to the quality of answers. The skill of creating truly open ended questions that minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering input is an essential skill for supervisors to develop. Interview responses can provide effective data for mining tensions that allow reaching beyond the usual perspective on issues. Thoughtful questions can lead to further pondering that provide ‘a grow light’ for setting forth new thinking (Hubbard, 1991: 34). Supervisors can benefit from these thoughtful questions if they allow the reflective space for them to emerge fully.

Approach 3: Identify themes and reflect upon the issues that emerge from action research and use this information to illuminate issues to be addressed with staff.

This is the crux of it all – crafting the key reflection points. The reflecting stage of the McNiff action-reflection cycle is essential to this framework. Taking the time to stand back and define issues beyond daily staff incidents will bring a more collective and reflective focus to the challenges of youth work practice. The action research cycle provides a method for youth work supervisors to investigate, evaluate, create and take new action (Figure 1, McNiff, 2006: 9).

Multiple sources of data can be viewed broadly. Consider a wide cast for what is regarded as

potential data: interview notes, observations, self reflection notes, research by others in the field, focus group notes, workshop evaluation notes, transcripts, case studies, journal entries (from staff, students, parents, self), phone conversation notes, emails, texts, performance evaluations, student work – written and artistic, assessment results, photos. Each of these has the potential to enhance the perspective when identifying broader themes.

Identifying emerging themes is a way of making sense of the data gathered. ‘Looking for themes in written material typically involves pawing through texts and marking them up with different colored pens’ (Ryan, 1985:88). Themes emerge as a search for similarities, differences, and repetitions is conducted. The voluminous raw data in field notes can be organized into readable narrative description with major themes, categories and case examples extracted through analysis of the notes. This analysis can be viewed as interviewing the collection of data acquired, and allowing for new perspectives to emerge.

Youth work supervisors who continually collect and synthesize data, putting these tools into practice to illuminate findings that help to understand the complex practice of youth work will perpetuate the action – reflection cycle with new data for new reflections and potential for new action.

Approach 4: Incorporate the issues identified into staff interactions such as staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, or learning circles for internal staff development.

Choosing what to do with what arises from the first three approaches is an essential step within this framework. Decide how to share the findings on multiple levels. With staff, perhaps incorporate new insights into staff meetings, learning circles, one-on-one staff interactions. Also consider sharing stories with other youth work supervisors and peers from other youth work organizations through newsletters, blogs or journal articles as a way to share knowledge with the broader youth work field.

On a staff meeting level, one time-efficient suggestion is to let staff bring an issue or dilemma to the work team to seek added perspective without taking time for discussion. Allowing 10 minutes for a team member to define an issue and ask for briefly stated perspectives about the issue (one minute per person to respond to the issue) is a way to empower staff to bring forward some of the challenges they are facing. Once they hear the brief responses, they can choose which ones to pursue outside the meeting. This kind of approach can help to deepen common perspective amongst staff and bring a mutual investment in defining future action. More in-depth staff discussion on identified issues can subsequently generate specific action strategies that both supervisors and supervisees support.

In keeping with the action reflection cycle (figure 1), it is helpful to plan some ways to evaluate new

action strategies that emerge, assessing whether they are working well or need to be modified. This step closes the loop for the cycle as moving to new directions leads back into the next observation stage.

On a peer level, monthly or quarterly learning circles can be effective ways to enrich learning and reflection with other supervisors. This kind of network can be immensely valuable to supervisors gaining support and insight from peers.

Approach 5: Coach and mentor staff individually, to discuss and strategize about the themes, dilemmas and issues that emerge.

As new strategies are brought to staff to implement, they need support for knowing why, when, and how to implement new strategies. Supervisors acting as a coach and/or mentor are essential to implementing successful new ideas. Once supervisors learn and practice action reflection, they can coach employees how to also be reflective and to identify themes in youth work practice. In this kind of coaching relationship the action reflection cycle that incorporates critical inquiry and reflection can deepen the supervisor/supervisee relationship, bridging the common understanding on issues and dilemmas.

There are a number of ways to support staff in this capacity including trying out some new internal professional development ideas such as ‘mentoring programs and offering on-going informal resources such as newsletters, on-line discussion boards, and “brown bag” lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise’ (Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew, 2006: 1). Supervisors can empower employees through these strategies.

Benefits of the Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice

One of the consistent challenges internationally for the youth work field is to bridge theory and practice. In the context of youth work supervision, the *Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice* is one avenue for approaching this challenge. This Framework was crafted as a specific project for the *National Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship* in the United States to explore the application of research to reflection and critical inquiry theory for youth work supervisors. On a practice level and on a broader field level, the framework encourages a strategic and proactive approach where supervisors reflectively derive perspective about day to day events, norms and practices based on academic learning, qualitative data, and supervisee perception. Benefits of this approach are multi-faceted, but the key practice benefit for supervisors is enhancing rapport with staff and building a solid base for engaging in a continual cycle for defining meaningful mutual perspective about the issues within the organization. Long term implications for the organization

are significant as the framework helps illuminate complex issues over time.

Supervisors who are committed to an action reflection approach (continually collecting and synthesizing data, identifying themes and issues, and coaching/mentoring their staff) will provide their youth work team and their organization with a more in-depth and focused perspective on youth work. Taking the time to implement this framework is undoubtedly a challenge, but when investing the time, energy and sustained commitment produces results, the return on investment unfolds. As noted earlier by Wilson-Ahlstrom (2008), the difference in practice may come down to whether youth workers are fortunate to have a good supervisor. As supervisors engage with supervisees to understand issues based in qualitative data, as well as inquiry and reflection, the tools of action research enable the team to be more systematically responsive to issues.

For the youth work field, the issues and dilemmas that are illuminated through this approach inform the broader community about the complexity and interdisciplinary nature of youth work, as well as the critical role of youth work supervision in shaping the field. By blending field research knowledge with practitioner stories, a deepened understanding emerges. As Cochrane-Smith (2001: 51) conveys, the formal knowledge from scholars and practical knowledge from practitioners can build 'local knowledge' collaboratively. This blended knowledge changes the way the field regards youth work supervision and supporting youth workers. From the field level, the action reflection cycle perpetuates the exploration of new directions for youth work. Complex issues unfold with unique perspective and help shape action research questions to be explored at an academic and at a practice level.

The *Framework for Reflective Supervisory Practice* provides one approach for developing a deeper understanding of issues in youth work supervision by enhancing the blending of theory and practice. The enhanced knowledge that emerges from this blending of theory and practice may ultimately advance the impact of youth work supervision.

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