



Students and Field Instructors in Ongoing Supervision Groups

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Students' participation in ongoing supervision groups made up of agency staff and/or volunteers is likely to be an increasing phenomenon as stretched resources make group supervision more common. Including students in ongoing groups presents benefits and risks to field instructors and students, beyond those that are associated with the provision of individual student supervision or supervision of students in student-focused groups.

The Center for Early Relationship Support (CERS) at Jewish Family and Children's Service (JFCS) provides support and treatment to new mothers and their babies. Services include home-based support and therapy as well as consultation with parents, teachers and healthcare providers. A variety of groups and specialty services are also available to new families. One of these is the Early Connections Program, which offers psychotherapy to the mother-infant pair when the mother is suffering from postpartum adjustment disorder. The perspective at CERS, in both our direct work and our supervision, is characterized by a reflective stance. We start from a position of not knowing, which leads to wondering, and then to gathering a variety of perspectives and information and developing a working hypothesis which may be tested and revised. We welcome questions and embrace error, valuing mistakes for what we can learn from them. We are energized by learning from each other, recognizing that each of us has skills, knowledge, gaps in knowledge, resources, experiences and talents that are of value to others. Leadership is transferable—someone who leads one meeting becomes a participant in another.

We welcome students to the Center not only out of our commitment to transfer knowledge and to help shape a new generation of practitioners, but also because we are stimulated by their fresh perspectives and challenged by their questioning of old beliefs and practices. We invite students to join our supervision/consultation groups as full participants. They regularly participate in the bi-weekly group supervision of staff in the Early Connections Program. This group is led by the clinical director

at CERS and its participants are all master or doctoral level clinicians. In the Early Connections group, the student and her supervisor function as peers. Both are expected to present case material, reflect on the dilemmas presented by the case, pose questions to the group, and be as open about potentially embarrassing missteps as about times of fruition and success.

Participation in group supervision as a peer with the field instructor is a mixed blessing for social work students. For some students, particularly those who need to see their supervisors as experts, watching a field instructor express uncertainty, note clinical errors, and be challenged by her peers can be disorienting and unsettling. For others, this exposure and acknowledgement of mistakes can encourage the student to risk taking a position of not knowing and to dare to try something new. It may take some time for a student to feel safe enough in the group and confident enough about her role to be able to make use of this opportunity to use her field instructor as a model for reflective work. And yet social work students tell supervisors that it is at the beginning of their practice that they really yearn to see the work “being done,” so watching a team of clinicians dissect a case might be most useful to them in the very early phases of their learning. Monitoring the tension between the student’s needs and her feelings of safety and vulnerability is essential if she is to make the most of the group experience.

The student is not the only one who may suffer discomfort in being in an open, peer learning group with her supervisor—the field instructor may also be put on the spot. In addition to feeling the discomfort of having her work exposed to her student, the field instructor may feel that her own work is reflected in the student’s performance and she may feel embarrassed by the student’s presentation or by the student’s representation of the supervision. The field instructor may also feel protective toward the student in the presence of other staff in a way that she would not feel in the confines of individual supervision. Strong feelings aroused in this setting may either enrich or disrupt the individual supervisory relationship. Here, a field instructor’s willingness to make explicit in individual supervision the questions, difficulties, feelings, and tensions that she is holding in mind is key. We have found that field instructors can enrich their individual supervision sessions when they model for the student a reflective stance towards what has transpired in the group setting – meaning that they take an inquisitive stance as to the student’s reactions, their own feelings, and the ways that these can be integrated into ongoing learning. At the same time, the group setting is more likely to feel safe for both student and supervisor when there is a clear and stated expectation that any difficult moments that might arise in front of the larger group can and will be processed separately in a dyad. A field instructor’s use of her own supervisor for assistance is extremely helpful when she is facing strong feelings about her student’s work in the group or the shifting of boundaries and roles that this entails.

In our experience at CERS, we have found that with an understanding of the challenges, an assessment of the student’s strengths, vulnerabilities and readiness, and self-reflection on the part of field

instructors and staff, the experience of each member is enriched by participation in this particular kind of group learning. We hope that by sharing our perspective, which has included ample opportunities for student integration into groups over the years, and which emphasizes a reflective stance in all aspects of clinical life, we can highlight ways in which others may make the most of student participation and avoid its pitfalls.