

Cornerstone is a charity providing services for adults and children with learning disabilities across Scotland. Since 2008 the organisation, in partnership with Francis McFaul, Independent Practice Teacher (IPT), has developed a model of group supervision for student social workers on placement. Often, in busy social work and social care settings, it can be difficult to find time for supervision and sometimes group supervision is seen as one way of managing this necessary but time consuming requirement. However if it is to be successful and effective, group supervision needs to be more than a way of managing scarce resources and rubber stamping placement requirements. It needs to stand up robustly in its own right as a valued and meaningful teaching and learning resource. From the outset, Cornerstone was determined that the group supervision model would be developed in this way.

The model has four unique features which have informed its successful development.

Firstly, because of the diversity of services that the agency offers, a blended approach to learning opportunities has been adopted; the student is matched to the agency but is allocated work from a number of teams. Recently students from Sweden joined the agency as part of the Erasmus exchange programme and the agency was able to offer bespoke pieces of work to meet their individual learning needs.

Secondly, the agency has a fostering service, which is multi-disciplinary in nature and statutory in focus. Students are able to complete annual reviews of foster carers and present these to the fostering panel. As these reviews are in essence an assessment of parenting capacity, this allows the requirement for social work students to meet the Key Capabilities in Child Care and Protection to be fully met.

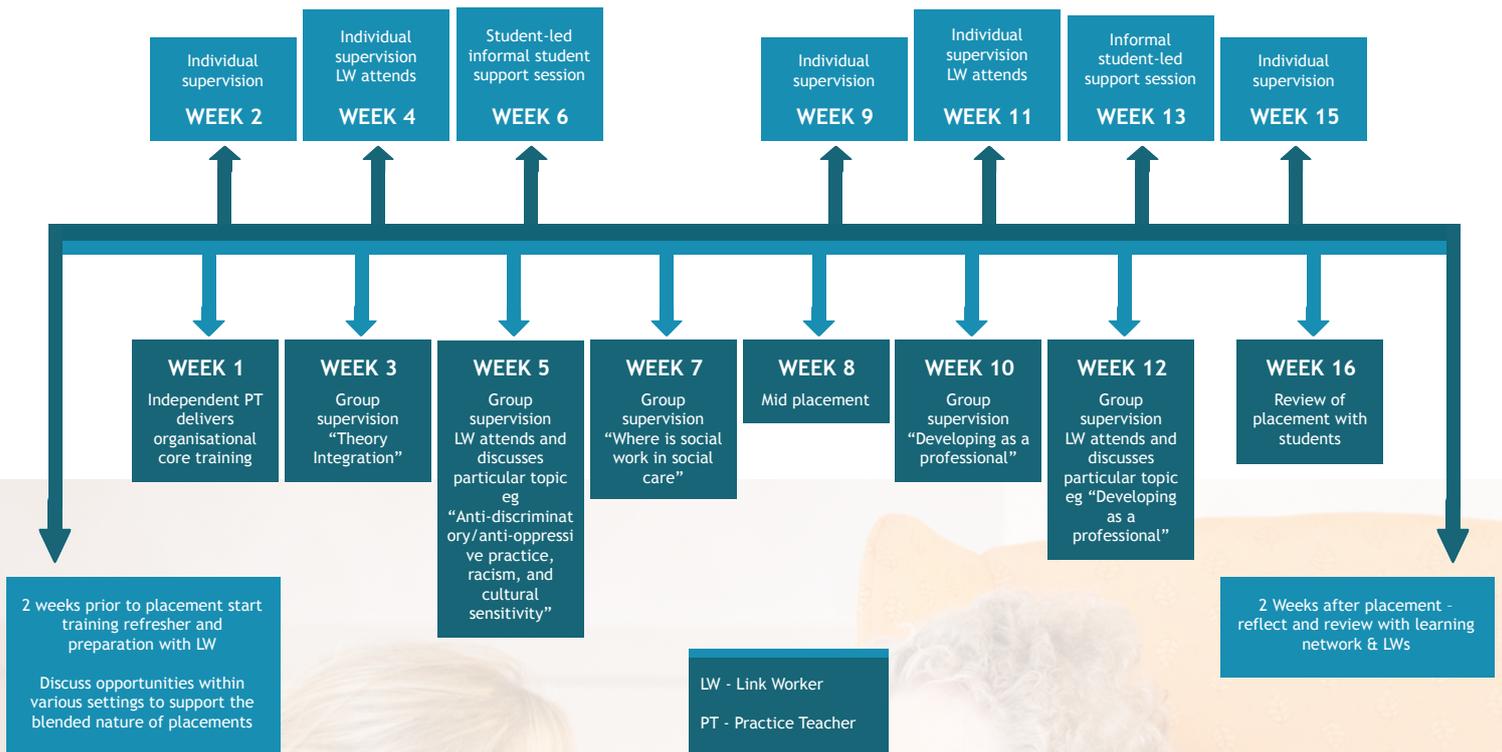
Finally the group itself offers a unique learning experience. Students have commented that it builds confidence and allows experience to develop in regard to public speaking. Students feel that it also creates a level of peer support. These groups can only properly work when supported by on-going one-to-one supervision. At times link workers have participated in group sessions and on other occasions the students have led the group sessions themselves. One student, participating in a group with four other students said

Thirdly the agency has been able to develop link worker training facilitated by the IPT. This training looks at the specific requirements of each placement route so that link workers will have specialised knowledge when students embark on their placements. Consistency is provided as the IPT has detailed knowledge of each of the services and has established an effective working relationship with each of the link workers involved.

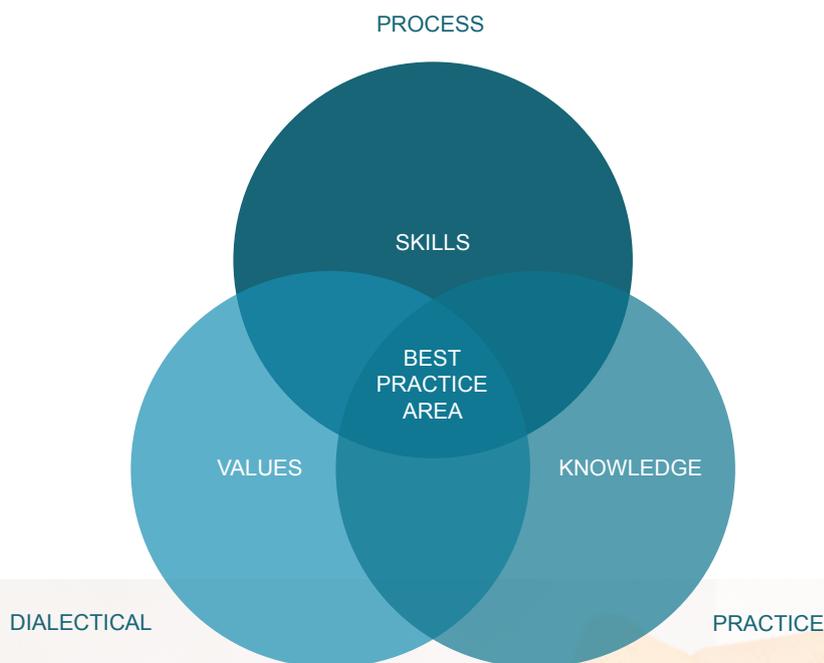
“ I’ve done 20% of the work but received 100% of the learning. ”

In another session which was considering the theory of Transactional Analysis, one student remarked

“I just feel this group plugs the gaps in my knowledge, the bits that my course doesn't do”



The components of good social work practice are skills, values and ethics, process, knowledge and dialectical practice (how we reflect, think and critically analyse). Supervision is essential for each of these areas. Under the Scottish Social Services Council's [Codes of Practice for Social Services Employers and Workers](#) a mandate is given for the embedding of effective supervisory practice. Therefore the team at Cornerstone felt that the group could not be developed unless it had a recognised theoretical underpinning.



One of the first decisions was that the group should follow Kadushin's model of supervision combining elements that are administrative, supportive and educative. These are recognised as vital strands to a student's learning experience.

Secondly it was important that the group process demonstrated certain characteristics, namely reflection, engagement with feelings, being experiential and being investigative. The model needed to allow an exchange approach where the student would be seen as expert in their own experience. The group would also need to be evolutionary so that it could meander down any pathway as long as it was within appropriate professional boundaries and that it should be participative and inclusive so that everyone took part. One student commented that:

“In class I'm quiet, this group gets me involved but in a safe way”

Relationships quickly established and the group progressed within a fairly short time frame to what Tuckman calls the performing stage of group development, i.e. it worked well together.

Management theory was looked at to choose an appropriate group model design and three were considered.

Firstly Gordon's Law model was considered which is where a student presents a difficult practice situation and everyone offers a hypothesis to try and resolve it. In practice, so many hypotheses were offered that unfortunately a solution was never reached, therefore this approach was discounted.

Secondly a fan model approach was used. This is where A supervises B who supervises C who supervises D who in turn supervises A. In practice, the way that students gave each other developmental feedback often conflicted with professional boundaries so again this approach was not progressed.

Finally a cascade model was decided upon. With this approach the students each present a topic and a discussion follows with regard to how it could be applied to practice. By adopting this model an acronym was developed as to how the group should function:

- P** all group members share a common **Purpose**
- E** group members are **Empowered**
- R** the group is **Reflective** and in **Relationship** with each other
- F** the group is **Flexible**
- O** the group is in **Open** communication and **Optimal** productivity ie it works well together
- R** contributions are **Recognised**, members are **Respected** and valued
- M** as a result of the above **Morale** is high

Recently a group supervision session took place which focussed on anti-discriminatory practice. The students kept their own supervision notes and the agenda was as follows:

- Administrative – a checking in with each student on how their placement was going and if issues arising should be discussed in the group or deferred to the next one-to-one session (depending on importance).
- Educative – the IPT gave information on anti-discriminatory practice, anti-oppressive practice and anti-racist practice, discussing the legislative underpinning for each. Unconditional positive regard, ethical dilemmas and cultural sensitivity were also considered.
- Supportive – the students then each presented a practice example where they had witnessed poor practice and discussed what they had learned from each scenario and what they could do differently in the future.

The session ended with practical agreements regarding dates for further meetings and so on.

As part of the ongoing development of this model, feedback is sought after each session. The following comments are feedback from the session mentioned above:

“ Group supervision gives me the opportunity to learn collaboratively by sharing experiences, good practice and by being exposed to a variety of cases which I wouldn't ordinarily be exposed to. Students are also afforded the experience of peer support which, given the high paced and pressured nature of the Masters (in Social Work) course, is invaluable. ”

“ Group supervision in particular has afforded me the opportunity to broaden my knowledge of theory for practice. Whilst I may discuss a specific theoretical framework to inform a scenario, I gain a broader understanding from the other group members who bring their own unique perspective to the same case. ”

“ I have found group supervision to be very effective in terms of my learning and personal development. The small group dynamic allows everyone involved not only to learn from each other, but also to contribute by sharing ideas, experiences etc. I highly recommend it ”

“Group supervision gives me the opportunity to hear about different situations and how the student felt and managed it. It also provides a safe environment for you to sound out your opinions, on the most effective way to engage, assess and intervene”

The model presented in this case study works for this particular agency. The facilitators do not set themselves up as experts but see it as a mutual learning process where they are in partnership with the students on placement.

