

Communiqué

GRADUATE EDUCATION

By Lisa S. Peterson, Suzannah B. Chatlos, Alexandra Payne, Meredith Weber,



Training School Psychologists During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned From the Faculty Supervisor Support Group

Mark E. Swerdlik, Jason P. Kaplan, Cynthia Waltman & Joan A. Struzziero

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Addressing the unprecedented demands created by the COVID-19 pandemic has offered a unique and timely opportunity for university and field supervisors to collectively identify and address a multiplicity of emerging issues. In response to ever-emerging demands, trainers, supervisors, and practitioners communicated and collaborated in a manner that exemplifies the very best of the profession. At the national level, NASP's rapid response and the resulting proliferation of resources made available on the website was impressive. Similarly, state organizations forged ahead with even more specific material to meet the needs of constituents. A group soon formed to meet the concrete, specific, and unique needs of both university and field-based supervisors. The decision to meet weekly quickly emerged and from its inception, this group has strived to provide support for its members, disseminate collective knowledge, and share resources. The group also sought to address the stress faced by these supervisors. Inarguably, school psychologists understand and acknowledge the importance of acquiring and practicing skills in collaboration and consultation. This most basic tenet underlies the mission of this group, which seeks to proactively and collectively identify barriers and build upon strengths.

Supporting Field Experiences

The group had many discussions around helping trainees manage the risk they face when working in schools and how they could fulfill requirements while protecting themselves and their families. Much of this depended on how the district operated during this time. Some schools were open to in-person or hybrid and others were remote; this sometimes changed due to local outbreaks. District policy could also vary as to whether trainees were allowed to work on site, even if the staff had returned. There were also varying quarantine requirements for trainees and staff. These policies varied at the local, state, and national level.

Our greatest challenge as supervisors was helping the trainees manage the day-to-day ambiguity as they struggled to accept this unusual field experience by maintaining a high level of support with as much flexibility as possible. If a student did not feel safe going into a school, or was forced to quarantine, we sought out ways for them to gain experience and knowledge to help them have a valuable experience. Many of us encouraged our trainees to seek out professional development opportunities, particularly in topics that could be directly

applied to supporting schools and children during the pandemic. Because of the plethora of virtual trainings that are now available, trainees can learn from state and national associations and organizations, and often at an affordable rate. Trainees were also encouraged to do independent study in areas that would support their field experience.

The supervision group also explored ways to address the disparities of experiences within each cohort so that they all had the opportunity to learn. Trainees were asked to share the details of their experiences with their colleagues verbally during group supervision. With the proper permissions, a student might also be able to share a video of their experience. Trainees were also encouraged to reflect on their needs and create plans for how to improve and practice their skills.

Course requirements had to be adjusted to deal with these disparate field experiences. Some supervisors eliminated certain learning experiences or delayed them until spring. Many supervisors provided trainees with sample data to practice report writing and creation of IEPs. Some supervisors had trainees create sample profiles of students referred for evaluation so that they could think through the assessment process. Trainees could also practice administering tests with each other, with one student portraying a certain age and skill level, so that they create more authentic experiences. Finally, utilizing the eight-step ethical problem-solving approach, as discussed in the Jacob et al. (2016) ethics and law text, can help us navigate many of the challenges we face in this pandemic.

Supporting Student Mental Health

In addition to supporting graduate trainees' academic needs (e.g., field experiences during the pandemic), university supervisors discussed how to best provide support for trainees' mental health needs. Frequent check-ins with trainees were commonly used. Taking the time to connect with trainees and provide support is linked to decreased psychological stress (Nelson et al., 2001). In addition, when check-ins indicate a student needs additional support, faculty can help the student address the personal/professional stressor. For the university supervisor, this might involve a variation on a "morning meeting," where they set time aside at the beginning or end of each class to check in and build connections. Some faculty used semistructured strategies, such as "how are you feeling" memes or "rose and thorn" reflections. The "how are you feeling" memes generally consist of either an animal or a popular culture figure making facial expressions indicating various emotions. Trainees are asked to pick one or more pictures that best reflect their current mood. The "rose and thorn" reflection invites trainees to share celebrations as well as challenges. Feedback received from trainees indicated that these methods enabled them to feel connected to others by seeing that they faced similar challenges, while also finding ways to work through them and be successful.

Faculty also increased their communication with trainees, particularly over breaks. Trainees are more persistent and successful when they are kept "in the loop" and reminded that their faculty cares about them (Darby & Lang, 2019). Some strategies that faculty in this group used included emailing trainees (individually or program-wide) to provide updates, linking to important resources, and simply reminding trainees of their availability. This ongoing communication was particularly helpful in light of the ongoing nature of the crises trainees are facing (global pandemic, racial trauma, political turmoil).

Graduate students should be explicitly trained in the importance and practice of self-care; this is foundational to their professional growth and considered by NASP to be an ethical imperative (Kelly & Davis, 2017; Lopez, 2016). Knowledge and practice in self-care became even more crucial during the pandemic. One university started each practicum seminar with a minute mindfulness activity. These activities modeled self-care in

action and had the added benefit of “grounding” trainees before class started. One university supervisor had trainees complete a self-care plan (Kelly & Davis, 2017; Kelly-Vance & Mangus, 2020). These plans asked trainees to document what they are doing well, their self-care goals, potential barriers, and solutions to these barriers. The class checked in on these plans often throughout the semester. During these check-ins, trainees had the added benefit of problem solving with their class members. Other universities added a self-care question to their mental health check-in as a way to ensure trainees felt they could manage the challenges they described. Another university started requiring interns to log 2 hours per week of self-care prior to the pandemic. These hours are counted as part of their 1,200 hours. Opportunity to discuss what self-care means to individuals is important to encourage acceptance of all kinds of self-care from exercising, meditation, tending to plants, or walking the dog.

Finally, university supervisors navigated ways to maintain communication within and between cohorts. Psychology graduate trainees are particularly likely to seek out support from classmates (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). In fact, NASP encourages graduate trainees to form support systems with their own cohort members and more experienced trainees (Barton & Riddle, 2019; Smith, 2020). Before the pandemic, graduate students saw each other frequently on campus. Once instruction became remote, trainees were limited in their ability to interact with their own and other cohort members in a more informal manner. It became many programs’ responsibility to be proactive and creative in providing opportunities for interprogram social engagement. One university set up Zoom Q&A sessions for intercohort communication (e.g., second-years were paired with interns to ask about the internship application process). Faculty started the meeting but then left so an honest conversation could take place. Attendance at these sessions was high, and student feedback on these sessions was overwhelmingly positive.

A list of minute mindfulness activities is available by contacting Suzannah B. Chatlos at suzannah.chatlos@plattsburgh.edu.

Supporting Field Supervisors

In addition to promoting graduate students’ academic and mental health needs, the supervisors also discussed how to best assist field supervisors. Field supervisors play an invaluable role in school psychologists’ training and often offer their service gratis. The group did not lose sight of the essential function that field supervisors play as frontline workers and the reality that they faced the same social, emotional, and logistical challenges as our trainees. In examining how to best support our field supervisors, the group’s discussions and conversations with field supervisors led us to focus on a few critical areas: increased communication, increased professional development, and opportunities for metasupervision.

Due to the unusual circumstances that emerged for field supervisors, university supervisors increased communication. Many field supervisors expressed fear about not providing adequate training for their trainees and worried about trainee’s readiness for independent practice. By increasing communication, graduate programs were able to work with field supervisors and trainees to deliver alternative activities, connect activities that were occurring to the domains of practice, and address training issues at individual sites.

Programs also worked with their field supervisors to provide professional development in areas where the supervisor and trainee may not have extensive knowledge. Graduate programs were able to target specific areas of need such as telehealth and virtual assessment, virtual observations, and virtual supervision. A recurring theme that emerged from field supervisors were legal and ethical concerns. In one state, two

university supervisors offered free professional development through their state association on legal and ethical issues related to COVID-19. Over 50 field supervisors attended on a Friday night at 5:00 p.m., speaking volumes to field supervisors' commitment to the profession.

Some graduate programs facilitated metasupervision groups. Metasupervision is a critical practice that can promote professional growth and reduce burn-out (Simon & Swerdlik, 2017). One program offered bimonthly peer support groups. The university supervisors offered encouragement and suggestions to support the needs of trainees and enhance supervisors' practices. Field supervisors had time to express the challenges of supervising during COVID-19 and share ideas on how they could get trainees practice in a wide variety of domains. The peer supervision groups also allowed supervisors from various districts to maintain connections, which was particularly important for those working in districts where they may have been the only school psychologist. Not only did metasupervision enhance supervisors' development, but in sharing their involvement with their trainees, supervisors were also demonstrating the importance of collegial collaboration as a vital practice for professional effectiveness and growth (Simon & Swerdlik, 2017).

Telesupervision

One of the topics that was addressed early in the group was telesupervision. This priority was necessitated by the pivot in March 2020 due to the pandemic when most university and field supervisors had to move to remote or telesupervision. Telesupervision includes videoconference platforms such as Zoom, email, and phone. Although telesupervision is a fairly new topic, early research shows that telesupervision can be as effective as supervision provided face-to-face (Tarlow et al., 2020). The same factors that contribute to effective face-to-face supervision also contribute to effective telesupervision (Simon & Swerdlik, 2017). Supervisors should have strong interpersonal and communication skills, set high goals for their supervisees, and have a commitment to supervisee growth; supervisees should focus on recognizing their legal and ethical responsibility to share all information related to their activities with their supervisor, prepare for sessions, demonstrate motivation, and show willingness to learn.

Martin et al. (2017) identify several other factors related to telesupervision that should be considered. Telesupervision requires greater intentionality in building an effective supervisory relationship characterized by mutual trust and respect. Supervisors will need to take more time getting to know their supervisees by strategies such as using structured "get to know you" activities. Supervisors also need to pay close attention to supervisee body language and facial cues and look directly at the camera when speaking. Supervisors should also conduct physical and mental health wellness checks-ins at the start of each session. As with face-to-face supervision, supervisors use written contracts to create clear expectations and goals for the telesupervisory experience and for each session. Session planners can be used to share weekly goals and progress and create agenda items (Mason & Hayes, 2007).

Consideration of the use of a multimethod approach to supervision is important when conducting telesupervision. Just as in face-to-face supervision, supervisors do not want to rely solely on verbal self-report to assess competencies and monitor their supervisee's clinical work; they would rather use a variety of supervision methods such as role play, cotherapy, and direct observation (Simon & Swerdlik, 2017). Technology such as Zoom can be used to implement multiple supervision methods remotely. With input from supervisees, supervisors should also formulate a plan (e.g., text or phone each other if problems develop, identify a technical support person) to address technological problems (Chou et al., 2012). Supervisors should consider the use of silence during telesupervision sessions and define a period during which it will be allowed and accepted. Attention should also be paid to the use of appropriate speaking etiquette such as

turn-taking, being clear while speaking, using the mute button while listening in a group supervision format or when background noise is present, paraphrasing, and use of questions. Supervisors and their supervisees also want to explicitly avoid multitasking during the session.

Supervisors should also plan for and factor in increased availability, setting aside and protecting additional supervision time (Wood et al., 2005). This additional supervision time can occur through videoconferencing, phone, or email. Supervisors would also want to discuss a plan for this increased availability at the onset of supervision and include this plan in the written contract, revisiting it often. There should also be planning to protect online security, safety, and confidentiality such as password protecting all documents exchanged during supervision (Martin et al., 2017).

Finally, a review of the telesupervision process should occur regularly. It is important to regularly monitor and evaluate the telesupervision process and outcomes (Brandoff & Lombardi, 2012; Martin et al., 2017). This monitoring should include evaluating whether the supervisee's needs and learning goals are being met, if effective feedback is being provided, and whether the supervisory relationship is providing adequate support. Just as is true for face-to-face supervision, frequently seeking feedback from supervisees is critical in implementing effective telesupervision (Simon & Swerdlik, 2017).

Copies of supervision contracts with telesupervision language incorporated and of session planners are available by contacting Mark Swerdlik at meswerd@ilstu.edu.

Supervision Needs of Interns

The group paid particular attention to the needs of interns. For example, one university added individual supervision every third week to facilitate a more personal exchange where the intern could express concerns that they might not be comfortable sharing in the group session. This allowed the university supervisor a better opportunity to monitor the intern's response to the challenges of the pandemic and provide support as needed. Trying to balance internship/school pandemic challenges and home/family pandemic challenges became overwhelming at times. Interns were also provided a list of places they could access support either online or through the university counseling center.

Field experiences are an important component of school psychology training programs; these experiences provide trainees with exposure to the school setting and with opportunities to develop skills and competencies in various aspects of school psychology practice (NASP, 2020a). Due to the ongoing pandemic, the learning experiences and training opportunities available to school psychology trainees differ from what may otherwise have occurred as part of field placements prior to the pandemic; for example, trainees may have fewer opportunities to interact with students and school staff in an in-person or face-to-face context. For these trainees, it is beneficial to consider how their training experiences have been impacted by the pandemic and then communicate the corresponding needs to their supervisors. Newman (2013) recommends that interns take an active role in their training by assessing their skills and needs and then specifying goals for their internship plan that address those areas of need. Given that many trainees have had their field experiences impacted by the pandemic, this plan may be particularly useful for trainees to identify those experiences that they want or need to have prior to completing their training and beginning their career as a school psychologist.

It can also be useful for trainees to identify situations or experiences for which they would benefit from additional supervision. During their internship placement, interns should receive a minimum of 2 hours of supervision per week (NASP, 2020a); however, interns may desire additional supervision. As noted by Simon

and Swerdlik (2017), supervisors and supervisees should discuss how to request extra supervision when it is needed; interns should also know that it is considered typical to request additional supervision at points throughout their field placement. As such, trainees should consider when they believe that more supervision is necessary and communicate that to their supervisor.

Mentorship Needs of Early Career School Psychologists

In thinking about how to best prepare current trainees to enter the field in the next year and beyond, mentoring emerged as a support that will be more important than ever for school psychologists trained during COVID-19. Mentoring has long been acknowledged as an important contributor to success and longevity in the field of school psychology (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Newman, 2020), and is included as part of the current NASP Practice Model under Organizational Principle 5: Supervision, Peer Consultation, and Mentoring (NASP 2020b). Having a mentor who is distinct from one's supervisor can serve a unique role in supporting early career psychologists and can also help to support new school psychologists who have had fewer traditional practice opportunities.

The group discussed how to increase participation in mentoring and make it a priority for graduates entering the profession. They brainstormed different ways to encourage experienced school psychologists to sign up to mentor and increase mentoring opportunities for trainees entering the field. NASP has created a mentoring program that may be a model for how state school psychology organizations could organize more local mentoring programs (<https://www.nasponline.org/membership-and-community/get-involved/find-a-mentor-program>). Additionally, the group discussed the importance of self-advocacy for those entering the field in the next few years. University programs can ensure that not only are trainees getting what they need in terms of competencies and accreditation requirements, but that they also become comfortable with letting future supervisors know where they may need more support or training if there are gaps. This requires interns to be able to honestly assess personal skill development to identify strengths and areas of need, and be comfortable sharing these needs. In turn, supervisors will also need to continue to show understanding and create an atmosphere in which asking for help is encouraged, as they have mostly done throughout the pandemic.

Several group members went back to their state organizations to find ways to best support these efforts in our respective states. State organizations may incentivize participation and highlight the benefits of mentoring for both mentor and mentee. One state organization will promote the practice in its membership newsletter and will also offer nominal gifts for mentors who sign up.

Future Ethical and Professional Issues

As we look toward the future impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, several ethical and professional issues have emerged that have implications for field training. First, COVID-19 has caused significant challenges to the health and safety at school for students and staff. Increasingly, families face the loss of a loved one to COVID-19, and school districts have experienced the loss of staff and students in their school communities (NASP, 2020). While school psychologists and trainees must always be prepared to manage a variety of crises, this year posed situations where loss may have been felt much more acutely by staff, students, and university supervisors. The group discussed challenges such as losing field supervisors and school staff to COVID-19-related illness or even death, and how to support all parties in these situations even while the pandemic is still a major concern and in-person contact is limited.

While posing increased challenges, COVID-19 has also presented a unique opportunity for schools and their staff to deepen their understanding of the impact of trauma and stress on students and communities. Many schools and districts have shifted focus to include more social–emotional learning and support services, and many school psychology trainees have been able to assist in these efforts by facilitating classroom groups, helping to provide more targeted mental health interventions, or reaching out to support individual families. Since many school psychologists had put evaluations on hold for at least some part of the last year, some trainees were able to gain a more complete view of the many roles that a school psychologist can play in a school community. It is expected that these opportunities will grow during the coming year.

The arrival of two vaccines against COVID-19 in December 2020 began to shift the conversation around how this significant development would impact training and practice issues. Concerns around the difficulties that have arisen in distribution highlighted issues of inequity in different districts around the country. Group members come from various regions of the United States; this helped participants get a sense of the similarities and differences in different areas regarding schools reopening and in vaccine distribution. It appears, as of this writing, that vaccine availability for school and university staff in different states around the country has also varied greatly. This will certainly impact the experiences of trainees in the future. While no vaccine has yet been approved for children or adolescents, the group discussed whether the COVID-19 vaccine might one day become mandatory for those attending or working in a school.

Resources

Several resources proved valuable to the group's success with their trainees. NASP manages a COVID-19 Resource Center (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center>), which provides guidance documents in the following topics: returning to school, special education, crisis and mental health, and family and educators. Another collection of resources can be found at the Trainers of School Psychologists' (TSP) website (<https://tsp.wildapricot.org/COVID-Resources>). The leaders of TSP have compiled information relating to professional statements, practicum and internship, telesupervision, assessment, telepsychology, technology, special education, prekindergarten–12th grade, and abuse and neglect. Other resources that the team noted that were of particular help to their work include the August episode of the School Psyched Podcast focused on the state of schools (<https://schoolpsychedpodcast.wordpress.com/2020/08/24/spp-extra-the-state-of-school-psychology-in-fall-2020>), and the School Psychology Self-Care website (<https://www.schoolpsychologyselfcare.com>).

In addition to these resources, many tools that were used by the team were created by members. Dr. Elana Wolkoff at William James College shared presentations on telehealth and supervision. As previously mentioned, Dr. Mark Swerdlik shared his extensive experience and resources around supervision. Other experts in the field of school psychology supervision, including Dr. Joan Struzziero, shared tools and ideas created at the state level. Finally, many resources were obtained through reaching out to colleagues via Listservs, email, and social media. Social media became a valuable tool for reaching out to colleagues and sharing innovative ideas. The concept of checking in with classes using memes, for example, came out of a conversation on Twitter.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges to supervising school psychologists, including adjusting course requirements, supporting student mental health, implementing telesupervision, and providing additional mentorship to interns and early career school psychologists. The pandemic has also placed additional stress on those responsible for training future school psychologists. By working together, the group was able to share strategies that proved effective, and brainstorm new ideas when there was no precedent for a particular need or situation. The opportunity to come together and discuss mutually shared concerns in a safe and supportive small group environment has been very beneficial and can serve to buffer the stress and boost the self-care of many involved. The group also had a mix of early career, mid-career, and highly experienced university and field supervisors, which helped to create a welcoming atmosphere to those joining. Attendance is open to all; please contact one of the authors for meeting information.

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LISA S. PETERSON, PhD, NCSP, is an assistant professor and training director of the school psychology doctoral program at New Mexico State University. SUZANNAH B. CHATLOS, PsyD, NSCP, is an assistant professor of psychology affiliated with the school psychology program at SUNY Plattsburgh. ALEXANDRA PAYNE is a graduate student in the school psychology program at the University at Albany, SUNY. MEREDITH WEBER, PhD, NCSP, is the director of clinical training and an associate professor in the school psychology department at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM). MARK E. SWERDLIK, PhD, NCSP, ABPP, is a professor of psychology affiliated with the school psychology program at Illinois State University in Normal, IL. JASON P. KAPLAN, PhD, is the interim chair/associate professor of school psychology at William James College in Newton, MA. CYNTHIA WALTMAN, PhD, NCSP, is a professor of school psychology and the school psychology program coordinator at Plymouth State University, NH. JOAN A. STRUZZIERO, PhD, NCSP, is an adjunct lecturer at UMASS-Boston and William James College.

National Association of School Psychologists

4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814

P: 301-657-0270 | Toll Free: 866-331-NASP | F: 301-657-0275

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