

# Training Master's Thesis Supervisors within a Professional Learning Community

Ingrid Fossøy<sup>1</sup> & Frode Olav Haara<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University College of Sogn og Fjordane, Faculty of Teacher Education and Sports, Sogndal, Norway

Correspondence: Frode Olav Haara, University College of Sogn og Fjordane, Faculty of Teacher Education and Sports, Box 133, 6851 Sogndal, Norway. Tel: 47-5767-6078

Received: September 7, 2016

Accepted: October 17, 2016

Online Published: October 18, 2016

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v5n4p184

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v5n4p184>

## Abstract

Completion of a master's degree has changed significantly from being the specific responsibility of the candidate and his/her supervisor to being the responsibility of the whole educational institution. As a consequence, we have initiated an internal training course for professional development related to the supervision of master's theses. In this article, we outline the course and the participants' experiences and reflections. Further, the results are analyzed and discussed. We use the analytical framework of the concept of *professional learning communities* (Stoll et al., 2006), and action learning as a tool to implement ideas on professional learning. The course itself was divided into two separate phases: one combined (shared) training phase and one phase where supervisors were divided into forums to discuss authentic situations arising from forum members' supervision. The results indicate that the course as a whole was successful in promoting the professional development and collective learning of the academic staff.

**Keywords:** Supervision, Learning community, Action-based learning, Consensus, Collective learning

## 1. Introduction

Starting in 2017, a five-year education program for primary and secondary school teachers in Norway (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016) will be introduced. This degree program will include work on a master's thesis, which inevitably means that the number of master's theses within teacher education and the concomitant need for supervision will increase considerably. It will therefore become necessary to involve a larger portion of the teaching staff in supervision at the master's level, and to prepare future supervisors for this assignment. A strengthening of teachers' supervision competence will also contribute to a strengthening of the learning processes of future master's students. The concept of research supervision refers to professionals "who lend their analytic power and their subject-specific experiences and discourse, with investigative processes and writing, with evaluation of milestone tasks within the time available for supervising" (Rienecker, Harboe & Stray Jørgensen, 2005: 24).

With reference to the PhD level, Stensaker (2013) points out that the relationship between candidate and supervisor has changed from a focus on the two involved parties to one that reflects more the responsibility of the institution to which the candidate and supervisor are affiliated. At the same time, we find an increasing interest in how to improve supervision procedures (Dysthe & Samara, 2006; Hasrati, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005). However, it is acknowledged that very little empirical research on how research supervision is offered and implemented has been conducted (Handal, Hoffgaard & Lauvås, 2013; Wickmann-Hansen, Eika & Mørcke, 2007; Dysthe & Samara, 2006).

At our institution, two master's programs—in teaching and learning, and in sports science—were introduced in 2010 and 2011. The experience of staff members' supervision of other master's programs, and the sudden requirement for supervisors for upcoming master's theses, made us aware of the need to prepare future supervisors for this role, and to develop some consensus-based guidelines for supervision. Feedback from students who had graduated from other master's programs indicated that supervision had in general been quite varied in terms of both frame and content, and that it had been more or less detached from institutional guidelines. Experienced supervisors at our institution also emphasized that the frame and content criteria for supervision were primarily based on individual ideas and interpretation. However, this experience represents local knowledge that can prove important in expanding understanding, access, and interest in the development of practice (Haug, 2011).

An internal course for the training of supervisors for master's theses was therefore initiated, based on the need for an increase in the number of potential supervisors, as well as on the request from experienced supervisors for the development of consensus regarding the frame and content involved in the relationship between candidate and supervisor. The content of the course is presented later in the article.

In parallel to the course, we wanted to adopt an investigative approach toward our own practice. We therefore examined the process along the way, and interviewed course participants. In this article, we present core parts of the internal course for training of supervisors, and participants' experiences and reflections related to the course. These are analyzed and discussed in relation to the following questions: What characterizes the internal course for training of supervisors, and in what way has the course been useful for the implementation of the supervision of master's candidates?

## 2. Theoretical Background

The development of the training program was based on the theory of *professional learning communities*. In the literature, this concept is used to frame the interest in looking closely at the development of knowledge in a community of practice. We refer to Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas (2006) and Stoll and Louis (2007) for an introduction to the concept of professional learning community. There is no universal definition of what characterizes a professional learning community. Based on an extensive literature review, Stoll and colleagues emphasize that international consensus ties the concept to a group of professional performers who within their collective activity share and critically examine their own practice. Professional learning communities can also be referred to as *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement* (Stoll et al., 2006). In addition to shared trust, respect, and support among the members of the community, Stoll et al. (2006) identify five key features that are typical of such learning communities: common values and visions, shared responsibility, a reflected and investigative community, cooperation, and group learning. The fact that a collegium shares a common vision and has a common interpretation of the purpose of the effort that is put into the implementation of change has proven to be core in bringing about changes in practice (Andrews & Lewis, 2007).

A variety of research interests are related to the concept of professional learning communities. Some of them are primarily engaged in questions of how professional learning communities can contribute to more effective organizations. Others are more engaged in knowledge development, and it is this approach that we take as the starting point in aiming to develop and improve the supervision of master's theses. The development and implementation of the internal course for training of supervisors have adopted a collective orientation, with collective learning as an important aim. As noted, professional learning communities build on the idea of the internal development of the professional environment at a particular workplace. A professional, investigative approach requires reflexive dialogue, case analyses, and joint planning (Jensen & Aas, 2011). The tools for implementation of such a learning community encompass, for example, action research, action learning, coaching, mentoring, and peer learning (Stoll et al., 2006).

We relate reflexive dialogue or a reflected, investigative community—as Stoll et al. (2006) describe it—to an understanding of supervising as an educational activity, and educational work that is constantly changing. Åberg and Lenz Taguchi (2006) describe educational work as “moving practices.” Steinsholt (2009) refers to an intuitive professionalism that is concerned with the ability to develop new thoughts and action alternatives that help supervisors see the alternative actions that work, and those that do not work, in a given situation. We see supervising as a process that is “straight through symbolically mediated” (Steinsholt, 2009: 60), which implies that the supervisor and the supervisee interpret and create meaning in the situation at hand. Thus, reflexive dialogue supports the social aspect related to the construction of knowledge (Sjö 2006; Brown & Duguid, 2000) and to the development of new thoughts and strategic alternatives.

Creating change is about building collective capacity, sharing errors, and shared success (Hattie, 2012). McNiff (2013: 11) emphasizes that “sustainable change happens from within.” Jensen (cited in Wittek, 2012) points out that we in society during the latest decades has experienced a shift in emphasis from person to context. Knowledge is no longer perceived as something that everyone carries with them and applies across different contexts, but as socially distributed. This means that knowledge is understood more as something that is developed between people when they are talking, solving a problem together, or interacting in other ways. This involves the social aspect related to the construction of knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 2000) and to the joint development of new thoughts and strategic alternatives.

### 3. Methodological Approach

Action learning focuses on active action, and we have utilized this approach in our project. It occurs when we “stress” the system, irritate it, and put it into stronger movement (Tiller, 2006). Tiller describes action learning as “application of scientific method, search for wise decisions, exchange of good advice and criticism, and learning of new behavior” (ibid: 46). Tiller further defines action learning as “a continuous learning and reflection process supported by colleagues, where the intention is to get something done” (ibid: 47). Action learning provides “courage to go further into the secret gardens of the profession culture” (ibid: 177), and may contribute to the identification of codes that elucidate the situations at hand, and increase the understanding of what is happening in professional life. This emphasis on action learning allowed us to design the project from an action research perspective (Hopkins, 2008; McNiff, 2002), which we then more precisely identified as a self-study project in three sections: the development of the basis for an intervention; implementation of the intervention; and analysis and reflection related to the results of the intervention.

The self-study methodology is a form of practitioner research or investigation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Zeichner, 2007; Clift, 2004). Within teacher education, this involves teacher educators reflecting on their own practice (here, supervising) with the aim of improving both their own and others’ practice (Hamilton, Pinnegar, Loughran, Russell & LaBoskey, 1998). The methodology seeks to understand practice from within, rather than from the outside, and at the same time aims to put into action what has been learnt in practice (Loughran, 2004). In this project, the self-study methodology therefore serves two main goals, namely the professional development of the participants in the internal course for training of supervisors, and increased understanding of educational practices and processes related to the supervision of students. It is important for the project that the use of a self-study perspective results in and confirms the participating teacher educator’s change of thinking and developed practice as a supervisor (LaBoskey, 2004).

We thus planned a systematic investigation of practice, grounded in self-evaluation as a basis for the development of intervention, observation of what happened during the intervention, and analysis of reflection and assessments related to the intervention made by course participants through a focus group interview. This process also included ourselves, since we are both active in the institutional self-evaluation and development of the training course. One of us (FOH) led the intervention and both of us were responsible for data collection and analysis. This involvement provides an interplay between practice and research on practice, which influences both the practice and the theoretical understanding of it (Kemmis, 2009).

An empirical basis for assessing how the training course worked was gained by means of a focus group interview, in which a small group of participants discuss a specific topic (Patton, 2002). In our case, four teacher educators/supervisors participated in the focus group interview. They had all worked in teacher education for many years, and represented different traditions: the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences (mathematics). The interview was audiotaped and transcribed, followed by a thematic content analysis with emphasis on the interpretation of meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In the first part of the analysis process, we focused on portraying the collected data in a holistic overview. In the second part, we systematized the content by compressing and identifying the units of coinciding meaning. These units were then categorized as relating to either the supervisor role, cooperation, collective learning, or participation in a professional learning community, with the two phases of the training course as the starting point. In the analysis of units, we focused on preserving the participants’ language and expressions as accurately as possible, thereby keeping close to the collected material and approaching the data with relatively few theoretical concepts (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2008). Finally, in the third part of the analysis process, the categorized units were interpreted in relation to what characterizes a professional learning community (cf. Stoll et al, 2006).

The development and implementation of, and participation in, the training course for future supervisors challenged established practices related to supervising. In this study, it was important for us to be aware of our roles as researchers and the question of validity, given that we were participants in the intervention. It is noted in some of the literature on methodology that conducting research related to one’s own culture is particularly challenging (Hammersley, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996), and requires switching between empathizing and identifying with those working in the field under study, as well as analytical distance. In addition, Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) emphasize knowledge about what is being researched and expertise in the field of study as prerequisites for viable interpretations, knowledge and expertise that we have as experienced teacher educators and supervisors.

Given the project’s overall self-study perspective, it was important to satisfy the requirements that ensure validity in such a project (Feldman, 2003) by:

- giving a detailed description of how the data are collected and being clear about what count as data;
- giving a clear and detailed description of how the data are presented;
- using a variety of data sources;
- explaining why we chose the specific data collected and the analysis instruments we used;
- providing evidence for the value of change of practice.

Impressions from observational data related to a rather lengthy period of time can be difficult to verify. At the same time, impressions of change fasten themselves when we are reminded of the changes, both related to our own supervising and to other supervisors who share their experience related to changes and development of their own supervising practices.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

We now present the key aspects of the training course, the participants' experiences and assessments related to the relevance of the course content, and our analyses.

##### 4.1 Developing the Basis for a Course for Training Supervisors of Master's Theses

As noted in the introduction, in the future there will be a vast increase in the need for master's thesis supervisors at the institution where we are attached to the teacher education program. Furthermore, experienced supervisors had requested a consensus about supervision practice, with respect to their own future supervision, their colleagues who were heading into the supervisor role, as well as for students who were about to start on their master's theses. Based on those needs, the training course was planned in two phases: a common training component during the winter of 2011/12 for those already recruited or soon to be recruited for supervising (Phase 1). Thereafter, the course would enter a phase where the training was concurrent with the actual supervision being conducted (Phase 2); here, participants were divided into groups depending on which master's program they were involved in supervising. In Phase 2, everyone who supervised at the master's level participated, regardless of previous experience as a supervisor at the master's level. Hence, experienced supervisors fulfilled both a participating and a mentoring role. Stoll et al.'s (2006) five key features typical for learning communities (common values and visions, shared responsibility, a reflected and investigative community, cooperation, and group learning), which were utilized in the development of Phase 1 of the training course, then became part of both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

##### 4.2 Implementation of the Training Course

Phase 1 of the training course consisted of three three-hour workshops. Table 1 describes the content in each workshop.

Table 1. Content and structure of Phase 1 in the training of supervisors for master's theses

| Phase 1                 | Content  |
|-------------------------|--|
| November 2011 (3 hours) | Consensus-based work on proposals for common criteria for supervising<br>Introduction to the literature on supervising |
| January 2012 (3 hours)  | Group work on various cases (with a main emphasis on the student-supervisor relationship)                              |
| February 2012 (3 hours) | Group work on various cases (with a main emphasis on writing- and text-related cases)                                  |

Each of the workshops comprised about 25 participants, and 21 attended all three workshops. All three workshops consisted of plenary introductory presentations and a concluding summary of the workshop; the main part of each workshop was devoted to both group and plenary discussions. Therefore, the training course was built on the social aspect related to the construction of knowledge (Sjögren, 2006; Brown & Duguid, 2000).

Supervisors prioritize aspects of their supervising in different ways (Dysthe & Samara, 2006). For example, some supervisors only offer supervision related to the text (product-based supervision), while others give priority to discussions, small talks, and long walks (process-based supervision). Both priorities are core in supervising and both are part of a supervision relationship, which adds to the relationship and to the expectations between student and supervisor, clarification of which may prove crucial to the cooperation involved in the student's thesis work (Rienecker, Harboe & Stray Jørgensen, 2005). Based on the certain possibility of representation of such a manifold

of attitudes, expectations and feelings, the three workshops focused on three areas embracing both thesis/product-specific supervision and student/process-related supervision.

Workshop 1 focused on the practical and financial framework for supervising a student in the work on a master's thesis, and on the suggested content for common criteria for such supervising. The participants were asked to share experiences they had had in the supervisor role, and to describe the characteristics of the features they saw as relevant to that common understanding. Throughout the discussions, the participants were particularly concerned with the essential value of clarifying expectations and the content of supervision. The participants were also introduced to the literature on supervising.

Based on discussions from Workshop 1 the organizers of the training course prepared several case-based scenarios for Workshop 2, with the main emphasis being on the student-supervisor relationship. The following cases were discussed in both group and plenary sessions.

- *The student makes contact by telephone, SMS, and email without any formal agreement. These informal contact approaches are made at night, at weekends, and even during holidays. It bothers me, but I find it difficult to tell the student straight out that this is not acceptable, and at the same time it affects my impression of this student in a somewhat negative way. What balance do I need to find between formal and informal supervising?*
- *The master's student is irresolute when it comes to maintaining progress in her/his project, but the supervisor finds the project extremely interesting and is actually the one pushing the project forward.*
- *You experience that the student invests feelings in the student-supervisor relationship that are not strictly academic in character, and personal feelings surface.*
- *In discussion with colleagues who also supervise master's students, it becomes clear that you invest more time and effort in supervising than your colleagues do, that your master's students are quite content with your supervision, and that several other students are somewhat jealous about this. What should be done?*

Workshop 3 was organized in a similar manner, but with the main emphasis on cases with writing- and text-related content. The following cases were discussed in both group and plenary sessions.

- *The master's student does not show up for supervision meetings, and does not fulfill agreements on delivering their work; when you actually meet, the student is keen and good academic discussions take place. However, these meetings do not provide any outcome. Every time you meet, you are more or less back to where you started.*
- *The student has a fairly high professional level, is dedicated, and has an interesting and feasible project. Unfortunately, the student is simply a poor writer.*
- *Well into the work on the master's thesis, the student begins to ask the supervisor about the quality of the thesis, and thereby to provide some kind of guarantee for the result.*

The course organizers applied the input and consensus from the workshop discussions into the development of common criteria for supervising master's students in their work. The document on the consensus-based criteria was revised after workshops 2 and 3, based on the discussions at those workshops. Hence, the document was a work in progress throughout Phase 1 of the course. As shown in the description of the priorities for each workshop in Table 1, we started a process in Phase 1 of the course where we emphasized the development of a common framework and common criteria for supervision. As emphasized by Andrews and Lewis (2007), this sharing of a common vision and common beliefs about the purpose of changing supervision practice at the faculty proved to be core when it came to making actual changes. The aim was that the course participants, by taking part in the development of the criteria, would develop ownership of the frames for supervising. Through this process, we wanted to make more explicit what is often left as implicit; for example, the meta-discussions between the supervisor and the student. We relate this aim to an understanding of supervising as a pedagogical work referred to as "moving practices" (Åberg & Lenz Taguchi, 2006) and what Steinsholt (2009) refers to as intuitive professionalism, which concerns the ability to see the action alternatives that work and those that do not work in the current situation. The work on the supervision criteria resulted in a written basis for a common understanding of frames for the cooperation between students and supervisors. This document outlining these criteria was to become a future common framework for master's thesis supervision at the faculty, and contains aspects related to the use of supervision time, and topics that should be discussed by students and supervisors. The document also outlines explicit expectations of both students and supervisors. For example, students are expected to follow the approved progress plan, keep their supervisor informed

about any delays, and are able to assess their own progress. Supervisors are expected to offer the allotted hours of supervision that students are entitled to during the contract period; they should guide students to a position where their master's thesis project is feasible, and they evaluate the work in relation to the time and work schedule.

Making the frames for supervising explicit, as described above, will eventually make the supervision process more binding for both student and supervisor. Nevertheless, a vital aspect concerns creating a balance between control and freedom, a dilemma that is well known within all supervision practice (Dysthe, Breistein, Kjeldsen & Lied, 2006). In addition to the document outlining supervision criteria, the contract signed by both student and supervisor should be anchored in the current regulations for the institution, together with the content guidelines for a master's thesis that are delivered within each master's program.

In August 2012, many master's students began their thesis work, and had thereby been assigned a supervisor. The timing of the commencement of Phase 2 in the training course was thus favorable (see Table 2), since both experienced and less experienced supervisors became members of the supervisor forum that was established within each of the two master's programs participating in the training course.

Table 2. Supervisor forum within each master's program

| Phase 2 (from August 2012)            | Content   | Responsibility                                |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Workshop within each master's program | Discussion of authentic situations provided by the supervisors from their current supervision | Program coordinator for each master's program |

In Phase 2, the training sessions—the supervision forums—were monitored by an experienced master's thesis supervisor. The content was mainly narrowed down to plenary dialogue about authentic situations arising from supervision. The forum should ideally function as a meeting place where supervisors are conscious of seeking knowledge together in the learning group that the forum provides. The work in the supervisor forum also provides structure to the way participants can learn from each other. In the planning of the training course, we wanted these meeting points to be recognized as what can be referred to as deconstructive conversations (Åberg & Lenz Taguchi, 2006). Deconstructive discussion implies processes where participants express their thoughts, and then try to work out what is behind their thinking (ibid). Such processes mean that we become increasingly able to ask questions that lead to critical reflection and to change our thinking, thereby offering the potential of discovering additional ways to understand. Through such conversations, the goal is for the diversity of thoughts and opinions to become the driving force in the attempt to learn and perhaps change. As pointed out by Jensen and Aas (2011), a professional, investigative approach addresses such reflexive dialogue. The development of strong learning communities leads over time to learning and hopefully to further development of supervision practices. The forum thus serves as a meeting point for general reporting on the work and progress related to the current master's theses, and for discussions, proposals, and the initiating of steps to be taken. The reports from the participating supervisors provide the themes and issues to be discussed, which often result in specific advice for the supervisor and general suggestions for further development of supervision practices in the master's program (and which may also call for further revision of the document outlining supervision criteria). The supervisors' questions and experiences always form the basis for the content of supervisor forum workshops. Through the academic year with master thesis supervision the workshops focus on many different topics and questions related to supervising—ones that do not always materialize into answers. Rather, they may generate new and relevant questions—ones that take the learning community another step forward.

#### *4.3 Analysis and Reflection Related to the Results of the Training Course*

Institutional measures such as the training course we have presented, and at least some consensus regarding such measures, will in our opinion contribute to the promotion of supervision quality. Here, we relate consensus to a common vision, common purpose, and frames for supervision, and thus to a similar interpretation of the frames that supervisors operate within. This concerns, for instance, how many hours of supervision the student is entitled to, and what specific tasks and functions we envisage supervision must fulfill. We see the common framework that outlines explicit expectations for both student and supervisor as an important measure in this context. The potential in research supervision depends on both the organizational conditions that supervision is subject to, in addition to the supervising framework and guidelines, or lack thereof (Rienecker, Harboe & Stray Jørgensen, 2005). Dysthe and Samara (2006) stress the important value for master's students' learning that arises from how the professional learning community is structured. As we have emphasized in this article, the development of common values and visions, shared responsibility, a reflected, investigative community, cooperation, and group learning are the core

hallmarks that Stoll et al. (2006) describe as being the qualities of professional learning communities. We have therefore prioritized these qualities in the training course in our interpretation of the data, and in our presentation of the analysis and reflections relating to the results of the intervention.

#### 4.3.1 Common Values, Visions, and Responsibility

The purpose for the first phase of the training course was to prepare future supervisors for their supervisory role based on the professional learning community's consensus-based development of a common framework or shared vision. All participants in the focus group interview expressed their appreciation of the training course, both in terms of the consensus-based development of a formal basis for supervision and because a range of research and disciplinary traditions were represented. Two of the participants expressed the following thoughts:

*"This initiative is the most important internal initiative for nearly 20 years for competence development at the faculty. It is a type of network. It is not one of those instructional regulations, but instead it helps us to agree on a professional basis."*

*"In general, we need both to expand our competence and to exchange experiences and frustrations. Such a common approach can counteract potential gaps in the supervision work."*

The participants in the focus group interview were unanimous in recognizing the value of the training course. However, they also emphasized the benefit of continuous attention to and clarification of the criterion document for supervising in this training course. The document may well require future revision and improvement. The basis for the activities and priorities of the supervisor forum lies in the participants' needs, and thus represents the source for future collective learning (Sjö, 2006; Brown & Duguid, 2000):

*"One becomes more coherent as a supervisor, and there is greater appreciation for the variation involved in supervision practice. The aim of the supervisor forum cannot be that all supervising should be equal."*

Although feedback from interview participants was positive, they also stressed that the objective of the supervisor forum should not be to make all supervision practices similar or equal. The common values and visions on which the training course is based—with an emphasis on a professional, investigative approach—require reflexive dialogue, case analyses, and joint planning (Jensen & Aas, 2011). The idea of aiming for one specific method or one specific approach to supervision was therefore challenged throughout this project. Although consensus can be developed in relation to frames or ideas about what qualitatively constitutes knowledge-based supervision, it must be sufficiently flexible for each supervisor to customize their own supervision practice within the consensus-based frames. As noted by Måseide (2008), ideally, we may see professional discourses—in this case supervision of a student working on their master's thesis—as governed by professional and institutional factors and conditions. The problems and challenges that we face as professional supervisors often have more than one dimension and must therefore be treated accordingly.

#### 4.3.2 Cooperation, Group Learning, and a Reflective, Investigative Community

As we have reported, the first phase of the training course for supervisors contributed to eliciting a variety of experiences and viewpoints. The introductory phase of the training course developed a document that drew up a common framework for future supervision practices. The participants in the focus group interview emphasized that the effort that was put into the development of this framework had contributed to more cooperative work:

*"The cooperation between us supervisors is strengthened by having a common framework for the supervision."*

Furthermore, the participants acknowledged the framework document and its contents as helpful in their own supervision practice. For example, they mentioned that they used the document as a starting point to clarify the student-supervisor relationship in future cooperation on the master's thesis, and to outline both student and supervisor expectations.

To promote professional learning and development, it is crucial to question one's own practice: Why do we work in such a way? What do we wish to achieve? By establishing the supervisor forum, we wanted to create a meeting place where as supervisors we constituted a learning group who deliberately sought knowledge together. The goal was to develop a dialogue around authentic situations from the supervision work. Based on participants' feedback, we clearly saw that the supervisor forum played an important role in an effort to elicit the many ways to understand the complex relationship between student and supervisor:

*"The forum gives us a nice opportunity to discuss real and relevant cases, big and small. As a collective, we can tackle various challenges we may face as supervisors. We meet some challenges in our own supervision"*

*work, but as a community, we touch on many issues. It is a good basis for the supervisor's learning."*

*"It is positive that we meet each other physically. That actually makes it easier to contact other supervisors outside the forum, if there is anything we are uncertain about. As participants in the supervisor forum we challenge each other, discuss, advise, and support each other in relation to the supervision and content of master's theses. The forum as a meeting place for the community of supervisors must be maintained!"*

*"The supervisor forum provides the opportunity to support each other and actually build up expertise together. Some of the power in such a forum is that we have various perspectives, various professional backgrounds, we supervise slightly different types of theses, and so on. We can discuss everything, from how we build up a thesis; what is really theory and what is previous research, and so on. And then we see that different subjects emphasize aspects differently. It gives us opportunities for new ways to analyze and discuss supervising challenges."*

The interviews also revealed that the forum provided the opportunity to present a variety of suggestions, cases, and challenges, but also discussed the requirements and expectations of the participants:

*"We must be aware that other supervisors have challenges they wish to discuss, although we may see them as trivial. The forum must be open to different experiences and the basis for the forum activity must be that we all help each other move forward."*

In sum, the training course provided space for discussion and made it possible to both give and receive advice in terms of change and development. Participants also saw the future need for expanding the focus at forum meetings from the supervision situation to also include themes such as discussions related to the disciplinary content of master's theses, similarities and differences between master's theses within different genres, and text requirements and assessment criteria that theses must satisfy when they come to be examined. These issues may add new dimensions to the professional learning community.

The training course appears to have contributed to the professional learning and development of the academic community at hand, through the creation of a consensus-based starting point for collective learning in the supervisor forums. The process leading to consensus about common criterion for supervising made common challenges visible and brought along routines that could be prolonged, and introduced new routines. This collective forum was vital in creating space to present authentic supervision challenges to other colleagues, to share failures and successes, and to work together as a professional learning community.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this article, we have presented the development of an internal training course related to the supervision of master's theses, which we believe may have an interest beyond our local context. The program was developed based on the core characteristics of professional learning communities as described by Stoll et al. (2006) with their emphasis on development of common values and visions, shared responsibility, a reflected and investigative community, cooperation, and group learning. In addition, we conducted a systematic investigation through a focus group interview with course participants. The main findings suggest that the participants found the training course useful in terms of their personal development as supervisors. They pointed to the value of emphasizing and clarifying a common framework for supervision practice, the value of increased cooperation between supervisors about supervision content, and the value of continually questioning their own supervision practices.

For supervisor forum members to maintain their interest and for the forum to function as a learning community, the content must be continuously discussed and renewed. This means that the themes highlighted at the meetings must be based on all of the participants' needs. Within this approach lies the basis for the supervisor community's collective learning. Supervisors become more coherent in their practice; at the same time, variation in supervision practices is both welcome and looked upon as necessary; the objective is not to make practices similar or equal. It is necessary that each participant agree on this from the beginning, as highlighted in the focus group interview:

*"So, the topics to be addressed at the meetings I believe must address our needs, and I completely agree that I feel that the benefit of this is the collective learning. That we in a collective manner become more coherent, and simultaneously there is greater appreciation for the variation involved in supervision practice. We develop our supervision, both individually and as a collective."*

Such a culture will require some clarification of expectations for new members of the supervisor forum, which implies some kind of socialization. At the same time, the new members must be allowed and encouraged to present their challenges and questions on equal terms with the more established participants. This will make the supervisor



forum function both horizontally through discussion and advice related to a broad range of real cases, and vertically through discussion of the academic priorities of master's level work and the organizational development of supervision of master's students working on their thesis.

The participants were just a few, and the program was limited to the context of teacher education. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized beyond the professional learning community we have studied, but hopefully our findings will be of interest and benefit to educational communities on different academic levels.

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