

Research Article

## Developing a Compassion Focused Supervision Model for Senior Leaders in Education

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### Abstract

This article describes the development and delivery of a novel model of supervision for senior teachers in schools, informed by Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT). It explores whether this model can be considered acceptable and valuable to senior teachers, and is able to be delivered by multiple supervisors using a manual. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were used to gather feedback about the value and impact of the supervision. Data were gathered from 39 senior teachers across three phases to assess feedback over time, as new supervisors were trained to deliver supervision with the aid of a manual. The supervision model, called Compassion Focused Coaching (CFC) in Education, was found to be an acceptable and valuable model for senior teachers in schools, with benefits for compassion to self, students, and colleagues. The CFC Manual was found to be a useful guide for new supervisors, with no previous experience of CFT, to start delivering CFC sessions. Limitations of this study include the fact that there was no tool for assessing supervisor competence and adherence to the CFC supervision model, which is an area for future development. No standardised measures were used, and the results should therefore be considered in terms of feasibility, rather than evaluation. In conclusion, CFC is an acceptable and scalable model of supervision for senior leaders in schools. There are indications of this model having value and impact in a number of



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areas of school life, from staff wellbeing, to dealing with challenging situations and relationships. Formal evaluation of CFC is required in future research to understand the effectiveness of this model, compared to other models of supervision and peer support.

### **Keywords**

Supervision; compassion focused therapy; education; compassionate leadership; schools

## **1. Introduction**

This paper introduces the development and acceptability of an innovative approach to supervision in schools that is informed by Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT). CFT was initially developed to improve the mental health of people in psychotherapy [1-3], but has since been successfully adapted for multiple different formats and settings across a range of sectors (e.g., healthcare, social care, charity, business, education, politics, as well as wellbeing courses for the general public). CFT is an evolution-informed approach that seeks to understand the biopsychosocial processes that facilitate, or inhibit, emotional and social wellbeing. In schools, staff wellbeing has been an issue of growing concern, with evidence of pervasive stress and burnout in the teaching profession [4, 5]. A recent meta-analysis by Maricuțoiu et al. [6] also found evidence of associations between teacher wellbeing with the quality of student-teacher interactions, the wellbeing of students, and the level of student engagement. There is a clear rationale for considering what psychological models and approaches may be able to offer in terms of supporting staff in education settings. CFT offers a useful framework for approaching some of the challenges of educating young people in schools, at each of the personal, professional, and organisational levels.

### **1.1 Supervision in Education Settings**

#### **1.1.1 The History of Supervision in Schools**

Supervision is a foundational part of the work of psychologists and has many definitions. A crucial aspect of supervision is the “opening of the mind of another” through reflective practice [7] and this has been used by psychologists to facilitate professional development, for at least 40 years [8]. Educational Psychologists (EPs) have a long history of providing reflective practice in schools. Hanco [9] highlighted the complexity of the teaching role and documented the provision of teacher consultation groups to provide emotional and professional support for staff [9]. Since then, EPs have developed a range of models for facilitating reflective practice in schools. Some are very structured and focused on action (e.g., Solution Circles, [10]), others have more space for discussion (e.g., Work Discussion Groups, [11]) and some include a specific focus on managing “challenging behaviour” and evolved to develop staff capacity for supporting child wellbeing (the Staff Sharing Scheme, [12]). More recently, EP’s have delivered a relational supervision model to support headteachers with the emotions of their role [13].

### 1.1.2 The Current Landscape of Supervision in Schools

The provision of supervision in schools has developed over time and Murray [14] summarised the current landscape, highlighting the number of models which are used and the range of psychological influences, concluding: “it appears EPs offer a flexible approach to their supervisory relationships” (p. 27).

While there are many models of supervision and influences on supervision, information about what is being delivered within the education sector, particularly within schools, seems to be limited [14]. A questionnaire completed by the Educational Psychologist workforce indicated that the majority of supervision provided by EPs is to other EPs (45%) and that supervision of school staff is a growing area, representing about 11% of supervision provided [8].

Within the supervision provided by EPs, 2% is delivered in special schools and 7% is delivered in mainstream schools [8]. EPs report that the ‘main purpose’ of the supervision provided is professional development (61%) with about 19% supporting specialist work [8].

### 1.1.3 The Impact of Supervision in Schools

Research evidence on supervision in schools is limited. Kennedy et al. [15] detail how supervision can promote skill acquisition and reduce burn out. Murray [14] summarised findings from a range of small scale studies, which indicate that supervision can support teaching staff and senior leaders to experience a range of positive results, including: increased self-awareness leading to change, increased self-esteem in general, and specifically to the workplace, and an opportunity to offload (p. 42). These themes were found to be consistent with research completed into group supervision in specialist social, emotional and mental health schools completed by Willis and Baines [16]. Willis and Baines [16] also explored the facilitators of effective sessions which emphasised the importance of the separate and external nature of the supervisor.

This paper describes the process of developing and delivering a novel supervision model (CFC) for senior leaders in Alternative Provision. This is a group who are not often offered reflective practice and could benefit from the ‘main purpose’ of supervision, both in terms of professional development and support for their specialist work, with vulnerable children. The research team includes an EP and Clinical Psychologist, and the supervision model (and accompanying manual) aims to build upon the work of EPs to create useful reflective spaces for school staff.

## **1.2 Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT)**

CFT is an evolutionary approach that is based on a scientific understanding of the nature of our ‘tricky brain’, with its built-in patterns that are shaped by evolutionary processes for basic life tasks and survival functions. CFT is particularly interested in the patterns that have developed to organise our social roles and relationships, such as those that orientate us towards caregiving/care-receiving (e.g., attachment relationships) and those that orientate us towards social threat and competitive relationships (e.g., social hierarchies). In CFT these patterns are called social mentalities [1, 2]. A key mechanism of change in CFT is helping people to notice when their threat-based competitive patterns are ‘switched on’, and how to practise shifting to patterns of care and compassion. As such, compassion-focused approaches typically help people to access and build up experiences of

safeness and affiliation by providing contexts, practices and insights that facilitate compassion to self and others.

There is now growing evidence that helping people to activate and train their compassion motives and mentalities - referred to as Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) - not only impacts a range of physiological processes, such as neural circuits, immune system, and the autonomic nervous system [17-19], but also supports psychological wellbeing in a number of different populations, including clinical populations [20], healthcare professionals [21], and the general population [22].

### **1.3 CFT in Education Settings**

Education settings are often highly competitive environments [23], with prioritisation of an achievement-focus, and with assessment and grading systems that naturally place people on a continuum of high- and low- achievement. In the UK, this is typically the case for both pupils (i.e., grading for academic achievement) and for the schools themselves (i.e., Ofsted grading). From a CFT perspective, these are the kinds of environments that typically promote the activation of competitive social mentalities [24]. Furthermore, in schools, the staff structure is often hierarchical, which naturally orientates staff relationships with their colleagues in terms of where they are positioned on the social rank. Again, from an (evolution informed) CFT perspective, this has implications for which brain patterns are getting 'switched on' and 'switched off'. Importantly, in CFT, when our competitive social-rank mentalities are switched on, this not only organises our self-to-other relationships, but it can also organise our self-to-self relationship [1]. As a result, this often leaves people vulnerable to patterns of self-relating that are more critical, and so can have a compounding impact on mental health and wellbeing [1]. CFT encourages cultivating compassion in both the self-to-other and the self-to-self relationships. Maratos et al. [24] describe Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) as an "antidote to competitive stress and the challenges schools face" (p. 2246).

The current study was interested in whether CFT principles could be applied in the context of supervision groups for senior teachers. In previous research with teachers, Compassionate Mind Training (CMT, which is based on CFT) has been found to lead to improvements in compassion (to self and others), fears of compassion, positive affect, and satisfaction with professional life [23]. This has provided support for the feasibility/acceptability of applying CFT-informed approaches for staff in schools, as well as promising evidence for its usefulness for teachers, particularly in terms of supporting wellbeing. However, the format of this intervention was an 8-session modular training course (2.5 hr sessions, over 8 weeks), and to the best of the authors' knowledge, the CFT approach has not been applied as a model of supervision for teachers in schools. In supervision spaces, teachers typically bring their own agenda items, and as such, the discussions are more tailored to specific issues in the school environment, such as leadership issues, as well as issues in the relationships with and between pupils and other staff. The supervision format therefore offers potential for applying CFT ideas to staff support and individual wellbeing, as well as to some of the broader processes and relationships in the school, and ultimately to the environment and school culture. As described previously, it is often the school systems and environments that play a key role in keeping people's brains (staff and pupils) orientated in threat-based patterns [23, 24]. Providing a regular, safe, and supportive space for senior teachers by integrating principles of CFT, could

support them to develop their capacities and confidence for wise, creative, and compassionate engagement with the many complex issues in the day-to-day running of a school.

### **1.4 Aims of the Current Study**

The aims were to develop and evaluate the acceptability of a novel supervision model for senior teachers, called Compassion Focused Coaching (CFC) in Education, which draws on the principles, processes, and techniques of CFT. Incorporating CFT approaches into supervision creates distinct processes in supervision sessions. Firstly, the model explicitly focuses on creating the conditions for wise reflection in sessions (e.g. grounding exercises, visualisation, etc). Secondly, participants practise the giving and receiving of compassion, as a foundation for supporting courageous and caring action in school. The aim was to develop this model in such a way that it could be effectively delivered by multiple supervisors in different schools, i.e., by developing a CFC Manual that could be used to guide new supervisors, and support fidelity to the model.

The development and evaluation of novel interventions requires several key steps and decision-making processes that occur during the production stages. Although historically, these early steps and decisions have often been missing or under-reported in the literature [25], best practice is to design and report these steps systematically [26]. The aim, therefore, was to develop the CFC Manual in three distinct phases over three academic years (2019-2022), whilst integrating evaluation and feedback data about acceptability at each phase. The different evaluation questions for each phase of development are as follows:

- Phase 1 - Is a CFC model of supervision acceptable for supporting senior leaders?
- Phase 2 - Is it acceptable to train additional supervisors to effectively deliver CFC?
- Phase 3 - Is it acceptable to develop a CFC Manual that can be used effectively by multiple supervisors?

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Participants**

This project was run in partnership with a charity in the education sector, called The Difference, which is a leadership training programme that places senior teachers in alternative provision (including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) specialist schools, see Table S1 in supplementary materials). In total, three cohorts of senior teachers took part in this study, all of whom held leadership roles in alternative provision schools across England. Demographic information about supervisees and supervisors are provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Demographics.

<b>Supervised Participants*</b>				
	<b>Size</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Identified Ethnicities</b>	<b>School Location</b>
Cohort 1	10	3 men, 7 women	White British (6), Black African/Caribbean/Black British (3), Other ethnic group (1)	London, Medway

Cohort 2	12	3 men, 9 women	White British (7), Black African/Caribbean/Black British (3), Asian British (2)	London, Manchester, East Midlands
Cohort 3	17	5 men, 12 women	White British (13), Asian British (1), Black African/Caribbean/Black British (1), Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups (1), White Other (1)	London, Yorkshire, East Midlands, Lancashire, Hampshire, Manchester

<b>CFC Supervisors</b>		
	<b>Size</b>	<b>Background and professional experience</b>
Cohort 1	1	Clinical Psychologist and CFT therapist
Cohort 2	2	Additional: an EP and experienced supervisor of teachers
Cohort 3	4	Additional: an Educational Psychotherapist and another EP, both with experience in providing supervision to school staff. The EP had specific experience adapting and running the Staff Sharing Scheme [12] in schools.

\*All senior leaders in schools enrolled on The Difference programme.

## 2.2 Procedure

In preparation for the 2019-20 academic year (Phase 1), a series of collaborative planning meetings occurred between a clinical psychologist and CFT expert (author CHM) and a teacher and director of The Difference programme, who had some knowledge of CFT, but no formal training. These psychologist-teacher partnership discussions resulted in the production of an initial brief document “The Difference - Compassionate Leadership Coaching” (Jun 2019), which outlined the basic aims, structure, and content of CFC supervision for Cohort 1. In terms of structure, the sessions were planned to run as small online/remote groups of 3 or 4 leaders in each, 90 minutes long, and running fortnightly during term time. In terms of content, some of the key elements of the CFC supervision model are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2** Summary of key elements of the CFC model.

<b>Element</b>	<b>Manual Pages*</b>
Evolution-informed psychoeducation about our ‘tricky brains’ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• De-shaming foundations for self-reflection</li> <li>• Mindful noticing of threat-based patterns</li> </ul>	24-25
Compassionate Mind Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using our bodies to support our minds</li> <li>• Creating the conditions for compassionate, reflective practice</li> </ul>	16-19; 47
Facilitating reflection using multiple selves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Angry, anxious, sad selves - listening to them, caring for them, and the conflicts that exist between them</li> <li>• Developing our ‘compassionate self’</li> </ul>	25-27
The 3 flows of compassion, and what blocks them <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self to others</li> </ul>	16-19; 35-36

- 
- Others to self
  - Self to self
- 

Compassionate leadership

39-44

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\*see Manual S1 in supplementary materials.

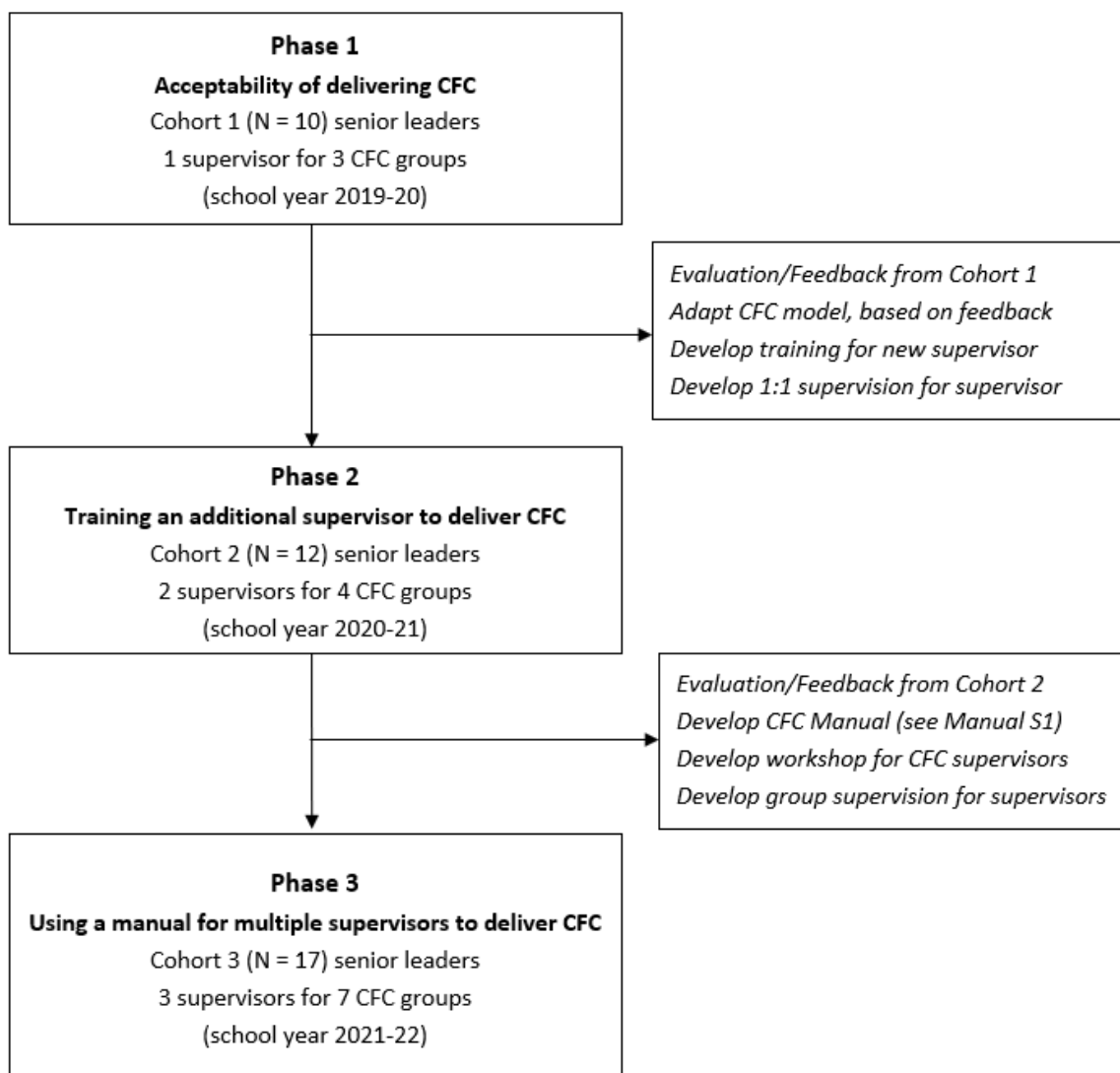
The subsequent evaluation, and further developments, of CFC occurred over three phases across three academic years:

For Phase 1 evaluation, feedback was gathered from Cohort 1 (focus groups, interviews, and surveys) to assess the acceptability and usefulness of CFC, and to identify any aspects that needed to be revised and incorporated for the training of an additional supervisor in Phase 2. Surveys were completed at the end of each year (anonymised and administered by The Difference programme staff, not the supervisors). Two focus groups (with 7 participants) and six interviews were completed at the end of the first year. Focus groups were run by author JT, who was not a supervisor for Phase 1. All those enrolled on the programme were recruited for survey participation, whereas recruitment for focus group and interview participation was 'opt-in'. For more details on the design of these data collection tools, see Table S2 in supplementary materials.

For Phase 2 evaluation, feedback was gathered (focus group and surveys) from Cohort 2 to assess whether CFC, with the addition of a new supervisor (author JT), was acceptable and helpful. Feedback from Cohorts 1 and 2 was also incorporated into the production of a CFC Manual ready for use in Phase 3.

For Phase 3 evaluation, feedback was gathered (surveys) from Cohort 3 to assess whether CFC, delivered by different supervisors using the CFC Manual, was acceptable and helpful. Across phases, surveys used rating scales to answer the question "how valuable have you found CFC?" Scales ranged between 1-5 or 1-10 (1 being low value, 5 or 10 being high).

Feedback was also gathered from the new supervisors to assess the acceptability of using the manual and training to deliver CFC (interviews). The flow diagram in Figure 1 outlines the three phases of development.



**Figure 1** Flow diagram of CFC development and evaluation phases.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to give the percentage frequency of participants providing each rating score. Phase 1 ratings were used to examine 1) the acceptability of the CFC model. Phase 2 and 3 ratings were used, with reference to the benchmark ratings from Phase 1, to examine 2) the continued acceptability of CFC when adding a supervisor, and 3) the continued acceptability of CFC when adding multiple supervisors using a Manual.

The qualitative data analysis process was influenced by Braun and Clarke’s [27] steps for completing thematic analysis, comprising four steps: (i) familiarisation with the data set (reading notes, listening to audio etc.); (ii) generation of initial codes across the data; (iii) organising codes into themes to correspond with the relevant research questions (Phase 1, 2 & 3 acceptability) and the specific survey themes (value, impact on compassion, challenging behaviour, resilience); (iv) presenting the data alongside the corresponding acceptability and survey results.

Analyses were conducted by the second author (JT), who is an experienced supervisor. JT was not involved in supervising groups during phase 1 and completed an independent evaluation of CFC for The Difference (focus groups and interviews). JT was involved as a supervisor in Phases 2 and 3



and is mindful that their experiences and positioning will have inevitably shaped the analysis process. JT used a research diary and peer-supervision with other CFC facilitators as tools to reflect on analysis. As this was an exploratory study of a novel and previously unstudied approach, there were no pre-determined criteria for assessing acceptability.

All senior teachers who register on The Difference Programme are aware that CFC is an integral part of the 2-year training/supervision experience, and all attend a CFC training session in the first week of the programme, prior to starting CFC, to ensure that they are fully informed, are aware of what CFC involves and can provide appropriate consent. Both researchers are HCPC registered practitioner psychologists and are bound by the standards of proficiency to uphold the rights and dignity of others. In accordance with these standards, we ensured that participants were aware that they could withdraw their data and also that they would remain anonymous during the analysis and dissemination process.

For more information about The Difference Programme see Table S1 in supplementary materials, and for more information about the preparatory training for CFC supervisees and supervisors, see CFC Manual section 1 (Manual S1 in supplementary materials).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Developments to CFC across Phases 1, 2 and 3

Table 3 provides a summary of developments to the CFC model across Phases 1, 2 and 3, along with feedback themes and engagement sources that led to these changes (supporting quotes are included in Table S3 in supplementary materials). A number of the developments were suggested and informed by more than one source, and change was influenced by engagement with senior leaders and supervisors. Included in the table are columns to indicate where there were multiple sources of feedback and influence on intervention developments.

**Table 3** Developments to CFC - changes made, feedback themes and sources that led to changes.

Changes made	Feedback themes*	Engagement sources				
		Cohort 1 Senior leaders	Cohort 2 Senior leaders	Cohort 3 Senior leaders	Phase 2 Supervi sor	Phase 3 Supervis ors
Increased summer training on CFT and CFC to support explanation	<i>Colleagues did not understand CFC. Leadership buy-in for CFC varied.</i>	X				
Added Q&A with previous participants to share tips for	<i>Preparation for CFC increased usefulness of sessions.</i>		X			

preparing for sessions	<i>Approaches to preparation varied.</i>					
Developed scripts for CMT exercises	<i>It is hard to change mode. I'm not ready to talk yet. Applying CFT is new to me.</i>	X	X		X	X
Experiential exercises to be used throughout sessions, not just the beginning	<i>Session timing was a barrier. It is hard to change mode. I'm not ready to talk yet.</i>	X	X	X		
Used peer supervision to receive feedback on facilitation & delivery	<i>Applying CFT is new to me. Can we share best practice? Peer supervision is important for skill development.</i>				X	X
Developed a manual for CFC supervisors	<i>Applying CFT is new to me. CFT and supervision are complimentary. Making the manual more useful.</i>				X	X
Developed demonstration video (role play) of a CFC session to support training (+ demystify CFC ideas)	<i>"I was able to learn about CFT through observing training and CFC sessions".</i>				X	X

\*See supporting quotes for these themes in Table S3 of supplementary materials.

Figure 2 provides a summary of results regarding the acceptability of CFC, in terms of perceived value and impact, across the three development phases. These ratings scores are reported alongside qualitative feedback data, according to the relevant phase of development.

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3	
	Year 1 (Jul '20)	Year 2 (Jul '21)	Year 1 (Jul '21)	Year 2 (Jul '22)	Year 1 (Jul '22)	Year 2 (Jul '23)
<b>Value</b>	5 ▲ 50% + 40% + 10% 1	10 ▲ 40% + 40% + 10% + 10% 1	10 ▲ 64% + 14% + 14% + 7% 1	5 ▲ 75% + 17% + 8% 1	5 ▲ 41% + 35% + 6% + 12% + 6% 1	
<b>Impact – compassion</b> <i>Supported my ability to be compassionate towards myself, students, and staff</i>		<i>Myself, students, and staff (combined)</i>  Strongly Agree ▲ 70% + 30%  Strongly Disagree		<i>Myself</i> ▲ 67% + 25% + 8%  <i>Students</i> ▲ 67% + 25% + 8%  <i>Staff</i> ▲ 75% + 17% + 8%	<i>Myself</i> ▲ 29% + 42% + 29%  <i>Students</i> ▲ 24% + 47% + 29%  <i>Staff</i> ▲ 35% + 35% + 29%	
<b>Impact – challenging behaviour</b> <i>Supported my ability to de-escalate challenging behaviour in school</i>		Strongly Agree ▲ 60% + 30% + 10%  Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree ▲ 58% + 33%  + 8% Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree ▲ 12% + 47% + 35% + 6%  Strongly Disagree	
<b>Impact – resilience</b> <i>Supported my resilience when things have been challenging</i>		Strongly Agree ▲ 60% + 40%  Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree ▲ 58% + 33%  + 8% Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree ▲ 35% + 35% + 29%  Strongly Disagree	

Figure 2 Acceptability of CFC to participants - value and impact ratings.

### **3.2 Phase 1: Is a CFC Model of Supervision Acceptable for Senior Leaders?**

#### **3.2.1 CFC Was Rated as Valuable by Cohort 1 and This Value Seemed to Increase over Time**

CFC was scored with the highest ratings (4 or 5) by 90% of Cohort 1 participants after one year of supervision, with one participant giving a low rating. However, after two years of supervision, all participants provided ratings in the higher range (top half of the scale, Figure 2). One participant indicated that perceived value of CFC might increase over time:

*“Initially I thought it [CFC] was a waste of time... now I am its biggest cheerleader”* (Senior Leader, Cohort 1).

#### **3.2.2 CFC Was Described as Supporting Compassionate Responses and Resilience**

All participants in Cohort 1 agreed that CFC had supported them to be more compassionate towards themselves, students, and staff. CFC was described to support participants' ability to respond to challenging behaviour, with 90% “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing”.

*“The biggest impact for me was on my own responses to challenging behaviour in school... conversations really helped me to reflect on what my emotions were in the situation, what the child might have been communicating... Also, I have grown in confidence in terms of being able to support colleagues in those conversations, particularly in my line management role”* (Senior Leader, Focus Group, Cohort 1).

All participants agreed that CFC had supported their resilience when things had been hard and most “strongly agreed”.

*“The weeks I missed out were keenly felt as I found myself less unburdened and closer to breaking point, than the weeks where I had attended, shared and listened to my peers...”* (Senior Leader, Survey, Cohort 1).

#### **3.2.3 Session Timing Was a Barrier**

Across both focus groups, participants emphasised that timing of supervision could be a barrier to usefully accessing sessions. They mentioned “not being ready to talk yet”, “not having time to shift modes from school to supervision” and being late due to “talking with students” and “meetings over running”. This was supported by the end-of-year survey, where a participant wrote “I struggled to access CFC. The timing was difficult as I was still at school (and it was on a day that was particularly full on)” (Survey, Senior Leader, Cohort 1).

### **3.3 Phase 2: Is It Acceptable to Train Additional Supervisors to Effectively Deliver CFC?**

#### **3.3.1 The Additional Supervisor Reflected on Their Ability to Deliver CFC**

Feedback from the Phase 2 supervisor suggested that they did feel able to deliver CFC effectively, and highlighted some of the experiences they particularly valued from their own training that could inform training of other supervisors:

*“I was able to learn about CFT through observing training and CFC sessions, it would be useful to distil some of this into a training session for new supervisors” (CFC supervisor, Phase 2).*

*“It was really useful having someone facilitate and experiential exercise, so that you could get a sense of how other supervisors were approaching it” (CFC supervisor, Phase 2).*

### 3.3.2 CFC Continued to Be Rated as Valuable after the Addition of a Supervisor

In Phase 2, CFC was rated valuable by 100% of Cohort 2 participants after one year of supervision, with one score of 7/10 being the lowest response. These scores remained high after two years of supervision with 92% of participants rating supervision as either 4/5 or 5/5 when considering the value of CFC.

### 3.3.3 CFC Continued to Be Described as Supporting Compassionate Responses and Resilience

Survey responses showed that most participants agreed that CFC had supported them to be compassionate towards themselves, students, and staff.

Most participants also agreed that CFC had supported their ability to de-escalate challenging behaviour and had improved their resilience.

Participants' comments in “Additional Feedback” also supported the perceived value of CFC:

*“This has been transformational in my further development as a leader. The two weekly sessions have provided an excellent platform to be reflective within a supportive environment...” (Senior Leader, Cohort 2).*

*“[CFC was] The single most important part of the programme - if only a model like this was available to all teachers...” (Senior Leader, Cohort 2).*

## **3.4 Phase 3: Is It Acceptable to Develop a CFC Manual That Can Be Used Effectively by Multiple Supervisors?**

### 3.4.1 The Additional Supervisors Reflected on How the Manual Helped Them to Deliver CFC

Feedback from Phase 3 supervisors demonstrated how they were actively and effectively using the Manual to support their CFC sessions:

*“Initially, I had a bit of a crib sheet early on - it reminded me of things to return to in sessions, emotion systems, multiple selves, tricky brains” (CFC Supervisor, Phase 3).*

*“It was in those early months when I felt the need to [use the manual]. Its existence was an important form of containment in itself” (CFC Supervisor, Phase 3).*

*“When I felt a bit wobbly, I could read through certain bits... I remember going back to the handbook and looking at scripts for the experiential exercise” (CFC Supervisor, Phase 3).*

### 3.4.2 CFC Continued to Be Rated as Valuable with the Addition of Manual-Using Supervisors

In Phase 3, CFC was rated as valuable by 76% of participants after one year of supervision. For the first time, more than one participant indicated that CFC was not that valuable to them.

### 3.4.3 CFC Continued to Be Described as Supporting Compassionate Responses and Resilience

After one year of supervision, survey responses showed that most participants agreed that CFC had supported them to be compassionate towards themselves, students, and staff - although 29% of participants selected “neither agree nor disagree” for these questions.

Most participants agreed that CFC had supported their ability to de-escalate challenging behaviour, although one participant “disagreed” with this.

Most participants also agreed that CFC had and had improved their resilience.

### 3.4.4 In Phase 3, There Were Continued Difficulties with Session Logistics

After the first term, one participant said:

*“I have expressed that Tuesdays are not ideal...I have then been given a Tuesday group and have not been able to access supervision which I feel is so essential.”* (Senior Leader, Cohort 3).

At the end of their first year of supervision, another participant said:

*“CFC sessions have not been consistent due to initial issues with dates and then mix up with dates and clashes in school.”* (Senior Leader, Cohort 3).

## 4. Discussion

Over the last 15 years, the CFT model has been successfully applied to various settings and formats, as summarised in a series of systemic reviews [28-31]. The adaptability and transferability of the CFT model to different contexts (both therapy and non-therapy) is largely due to it being rooted in a scientific understanding of how our brains function, and the biological, psychological, and social conditions that support our wellbeing. This paper has outlined a project that tested the acceptability of applying the CFT model to the novel context of school leadership. Schools are an essential part of the social environment for young people, and hence have a key influence on how all human brains shape and grow. Additionally, as the work environment for teachers, schools also have the potential to facilitate growth or burnout. Compassion-focused approaches have been previously shown to be an acceptable and helpful approach for staff wellbeing, via modular CMT courses [23]; however, CFT had yet to be tested as an approach to leadership coaching and supervision in schools. This paper has demonstrated that *Compassion Focused Coaching (CFC) in Education* is an acceptable and relevant model of supervision for senior teachers in alternative provision (AP) schools. In addition, the evaluation and feedback reported has shown that it is acceptable to scale CFC with multiple supervisors, and across multiple AP school settings. This scaling is enabled by a CFC Manual (Manual S1 in supplementary materials), which is shown to be a user-friendly guide to support new supervisors in delivering CFC.

### 4.1 Comparison of Ratings Across 3 Cohorts

The value and perceived impact of CFC was high across all three cohorts, with the majority of leaders giving the highest two value ratings (C1 90%, C2 92%, C3 76%) and the majority either agreeing or strongly agreeing that CFC had an impact on their levels of compassion (C1 100%, C2

93%, C3 71%), their ability to de-escalate challenging behaviour (C1 90%, C2 92%, C3 59%), and their resilience (C1 100%, C2 92%, C3 71%). These findings show a slight drop with Cohort 3, with a small percentage switching to 'neither agree nor disagree' for impact. Only one leader in Cohort 3 gave a 'disagree' rating that CFC had an impact in one area (challenging behaviour). Although this was only a slight drop in value and impact ratings, it is still important to consider what factors might have influenced this trend, and if there is anything to learn from this. It may be that the addition of multiple supervisors for Cohort 3, with varying levels of training and experience with CFT approaches created more variability in people's experience of CFC. For Cohort 1, there was only one supervisor with extensive experience in CFT as a therapist, supervisor, and trainer. In Cohort 2, the second supervisor, although not extensively trained and experienced in CFT, did have the benefit of one year of learning about, researching, and observing live CFC sessions before themselves becoming a CFC supervisor. For Cohort 3, the additional (third and fourth) supervisors were having to learn about CFT from scratch, in the weeks prior to starting CFC sessions. Although the new addition of a CFC Manual may have helped their understanding and learning, it is likely that a written manual is still not a substitute for 'live' observation and experience over time, which may be considerations for the design of future CFC training.

There are a number of other factors that might have influenced the inter-cohort comparisons that are not to do with the supervisors themselves or their training. Firstly, the overall size of The Difference leadership programme was increasing year on year, which may have had indirect effects on the impact of CFC; for example, the widening pool of schools and changing nature of some placements may have affected leaders' exposure to challenging behaviour and different school cultures. Also, a growing programme may have influenced people's broader sense of closeness and belonging with their course staff and peers. Another thing that was introduced for Cohort 3 was tracking of attendance at CFC groups, which may have impacted some leader's perceptions and experiences of CFC (e.g., perhaps feeling more monitored/enforced). Another external factor is the coronavirus pandemic, which had a considerable impact on schools in the UK [32]. In Autumn 2021, when Cohort 3 started, many schools were just beginning to emerge from the pandemic and all the lockdown measures that had far reaching impacts across multiple levels, not least on the mental health of staff and pupils. For many, the 2021/22 academic year was about reopening, recovery, and trying to gradually re-engage pupils with education.

Having said that, to still register top ratings from around 70% of the leaders in Cohort 3 is a promising finding in terms of the scalability of CFC. All three of the supervisors for Cohort 3 were using a compassion-focused model for the first time and had to be trained in this approach. These positive ratings suggest that new supervisors can be trained in CFC, and that Compassion Focused Therapy ideas can be readily integrated in the existing skills of supervisors.

#### **4.2 Benefits of CFC**

A number of participants referred to a process of 'shifting modes', meaning the challenge of shifting from the fast-paced mode of school life into a slower, reflective mode for supervision. These reflections from senior teachers highlight why the CFC model of supervision is particularly well suited to the school environment. As mentioned in the introduction, the theoretical basis to CFC (and CFT more broadly) is understanding how brains and mindsets become shaped and patterned by their environments, and how to develop contexts and practices that support compassionate

minds. The CMT practices and techniques included in CFC are designed to help people with exactly this aim - shifting modes, or, in CFT terminology, shifting mentalities. The idea of exercises like breathing, posture, imagery, etc. is that supervisees are using the body to support the mind. They are designed to slow the body and engage the soothing system (a branch of the parasympathetic nervous system), which creates the conditions for the mind to be more reflective, mindful, to be able to mentalise, and to tune in emphatically to the distress of self and others.

The findings of this study indicate that this aim was largely successful, particularly with reports that CFC increased participants' compassion to self, students and to colleagues. This is supported by the previous research on CMT in schools, which suggests teacher compassion can be increased over an 8-week course [23]. It would be useful to better understand how CFC develops teacher compassion over time and how this might differ from a dedicated CMT course. It is likely that both formats are helpful for schools to consider implementing, perhaps for slightly different aims. Indeed, it may be that they support each other, and examining the benefits of delivering a combined approach (a CMT course plus CFC supervision) would be an interesting topic for future research.

In addition to the benefits of CMT itself, CFC supervision also provides a mechanism for applying CMT skills and practices directly into teaching and leadership roles. For example, the participants in this study, who were working in AP schools for the first time, often used CFC sessions to make sense of children's behaviour and understanding the emotions in situations. Participants described how CFC supported this on multiple levels: noticing their own responses to behaviour, understanding students' behaviour as communication, and supporting colleagues around behaviour. Participants also described CFC as improving their resilience in challenging school situations. These findings highlight the role that CFC was playing in bridging between CMT ideas/skills and their day-to-day applications in school life. Another benefit of CFC supervision is that compassion practices, as well as supportive peer relationships, can be built over time. The participants in this study received fortnightly CFC with the same small group of people over a two-year period. Their feedback indicated that it took one or two participants a while to warm to the concepts and processes of CFC. In the literature, there has been a lot of attention to the fears of compassion, [33-35], which often need time to identify, navigate and address. Fears of compassion may have been a factor in some people's experiences of CFC. These are highlighted in the CFC Manual (Section 4, Manual S1 in supplementary materials); however, it may be something that needs more attention in future research and developments of CFC for teachers in schools.

### **4.3 Challenges of CFC**

An interesting finding was some participants were initially sceptical about CFC. This is understandable given the novelty of this approach for many teachers, and indeed the novelty of supervision (more generally) for them. The initial "waste of time" concern is understandable because a full diary can lead people to rank priorities for their (scarce) time. Even though some of these attitudes seemed to change over time as people engaged with CFC (as for the SL, above, who claimed to be CFC's biggest cheerleader having initially thought it a waste of time), this still presents a major challenge to the future applications of CFC in schools. Some leaders who are not engaged from the start simply would not have the opportunity to discover if they change their mind about CFC over time. This issue was addressed, to some extent, in asking previous Cohorts (1 & 2) to share their experiences of CFC with later Cohorts as part of their preparatory training. This allows the



leaders to hear - first hand - about the value of CFC over time, and perhaps the journey (from scepticism to value) that may occur.

The biggest challenge for all 3 cohorts was the practical issue of timings and coordinating the diaries of multiple school leaders and a supervisor, for fortnightly sessions. School days are packed and heavily timetabled, and for most CFC groups, the best time for a 90-minute meeting was at the end of the school day (3.30-5 pm). However, as the schools were closing, this time presented additional issues with rooms, such as staff coming in to clean or wanting to lock the building. Particularly in the early stages of setting up a CFC group, the main challenges to overcome were largely practical, in terms of finding a time and private space. At later stages of supervision groups, there were still occasional disruptions to attendance, although this was generally due to clashes with impromptu leadership meetings in the school. In terms of learning for the future, this is a reality of school life, and part of the requirement of school leadership is to be responsive and available for unexpected incidents. For the CFC supervisors, it was discovered that the best policy was to hold boundaries around the space and time, but to accommodate for the occasional absence, and to encourage good communication of the reasons for an absence.

#### **4.4 Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that fidelity to CFC was not formally assessed, for example supervisor adherence to the CFC manual or the competence of different supervisors. There were a number of systems in place designed to promote fidelity: the CFC Manual, supervisor training, and monthly peer supervision. There was also a role play video produced by the supervision team to demonstrate what happens in a CFC session, which itself was a useful way of bringing supervisors on the same page. However, one priority for the future research and scaling of CFC is to develop a CFC Adherence and Competence Scale, which can be used to rate the supervision sessions (work to develop this is already underway).

Another limitation of this study is that it did not use standardised research questionnaires to measure outcome. The rating scales used here were developed specifically for this project, and so it is not possible to make comparisons between CFC and other supervision approaches in terms of value and impact. Also, the findings of this study are specific only to leaders on The Difference programme and cannot be generalised to other populations. The logistical issues mentioned (with diaries/timings etc.) may also have had some impact on the results of this study, both reported CFT benefits and comparisons across cohorts. For example, in Cohort 3, which had a slight drop in perceived value, one senior leader (as reported above) could not access CFC sessions due to a clash from the start. As all the feedback surveys were anonymised, it was not possible to link attendance information with ratings; however, this could be a consideration for future research.

#### **4.5 Implications for Practice**

CFC could provide practitioner psychologists with another option for providing reflective spaces in school. This option could be particularly useful when staff require support in creating the conditions for reflection and in practising the giving and receiving of compassion. Practitioner psychologists could explore using this approach in situations when staff would like a reflective space that supports their resilience or facilitates them to better understand challenging behaviour.

#### **4.6 Future Directions**

Educators have found CFC a useful model of supervision and so there is a rationale for it to be further developed. A range of future directions are outlined below.

The manual was developed to support new supervisors to deliver CFC. Moving forwards, specific guidance will be developed around how to best use the manual alongside peer supervision and training sessions, to support supervisors in learning and application. Additional developments to supervisor training might include booster sessions, the establishment of support networks, and expanding the use video and audio tapes in both training and supervision for supervisors. As this practice develops, it would be useful to investigate research questions related to whether a broader range of professionals might be able to use the manual to facilitate CFC (e.g., social workers, teaching staff, youth workers etc.).

Reflecting on the reported impact of CFC, it would be useful to understand its broader applications. For example, how would CFC fit into a wider range of mainstream educational settings? It would also be interesting to explore research questions related to the benefits of using approaches from CFT and CMT in other aspects of educational practice, for example, in applying to school policies, disciplinary procedures, parent meetings, as well as to the classroom learning experience itself. Through the development of training and resources to support CFC - and the wisdom of CFC supervisors and supervisees - this work may also inform approaches which could be useful for shaping practice in areas like student's behaviour management, pastoral care and safeguarding.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Compassion Focused Coaching (CFC) is an acceptable, and relevant model of supervision for senior teachers in schools, although this conclusion does require caution given the limitations that are outlined. This study has also shown that it is possible to scale CFC with different supervisors, providing sessions across different schools. The CFC Manual is a useful tool to support new supervisors starting to deliver CFC; however, an adherence and competence measure is required to ensure fidelity to the manual. This would also have the additional benefit of supporting supervisors with a quick way of regularly checking in with how their supervision practice is developing in line with key processes in CFC. It is recommended that the CFC Manual is supplemented with preparatory CFC training and ongoing (peer) supervision for supervisors. Future research is needed for formal evaluation of CFC, using standardised measures and control groups for understanding the unique benefits of CFC, compared to other supervision models, or indeed to peer support more generally. Another possible direction for future research is to investigate fears of compassion among teaching staff who are engaging in CFC, and to potentially explore combined frameworks of CMT personal practice courses for teachers (as per [23]) alongside CFC supervision for senior teachers. There is a clear need for addressing the cultural challenges of competitive school environments and the impacts this has on wellbeing and mental health (for both staff and students). CFT-informed approaches are shown to offer great promise in terms of their theoretical relevance, feasibility, scalability, as well as flexibility of application across different aspects of school life, from compassionate leadership, to staff wellbeing, and ultimately, to creating healthy and optimal conditions for student learning.

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## **Author Contributions**

CHM conceptualised the supervision model, co-authored the CFC Manual and Supervisor Guidance, and co-authored the research article. JT conducted the qualitative data analysis, co-authored the CFC Manual and Supervisor Guidance, and co-authored the research article.

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## **Competing Interests**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## **Additional Materials**

The following additional materials are uploaded at the page of this paper.

1. Table S1: Contextual information about The Difference.
2. Manual S1: CFC Manual and Supervisor Guidance.
3. Table S2: Methodology Design.
4. Table S3: Quotes to support themes in Table 3.

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