

PEDAGOGICAL SUPERVISION: A PROFESSIONAL TOOL FOR GUARANTEEING THE QUALITY OF SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

Pedagogical supervision is a meta-reflective tool that activates analytical processes in relation to educational practices by focusing on intentionality and planning. It is an indispensable resource for conducting educational work with teams, maintaining the quality of services and continuously re-designing interventions. It is a lifelong learning tool that stimulates social educators to think critically about their identity, role and professionalism, enabling them to conceptualize knowledge acquired in the field and to formulate connections between theories and intervention strategies.

Key words: supervision, pedagogical supervision, educational professionalism, reflection, working team.

The professionalism of an educator is based on intentional thought processes used to analyse and account for the perceived worth of work techniques and praxis. Educators must draw on tools that activate and oversee reflective and dialogical processes of (self-)evaluation and practical transformation, leading to the development of theories. Pedagogically-centred reflection shared within work teams, services and organizations gives educators the means and skills required to review their praxis in terms of the intentional aims brought to bear on educational projects, in order to change these aims when desirable or necessary. Above all, such reflection enables educators to conceptualize the knowledge they have gained from experience, thereby broadening their framework of expertise and strengthening their professional identity.

Debate and comparisons of supervisory praxis can foster (especially if conducted at an international level) professional awareness of a structural characteristic of social work: educators acquire their professionalism via a lifelong learning process which needs to be recognized, constructed and supported with a view to enhancing these professionals' technical skills and pedagogical competence in reading events and educational needs in multiple contexts, and therefore in designing appropriate interventions and providing suitable responses to the emerging problems of contemporary society.

Supervision consists of a process of reflection, learning, evaluation and control, that is developed through the relationship between an expert professional and a social worker or group of workers seeking professional support, a suitable place and a time for (re)elaborating knowledge acquired on the job and an ad hoc setting for reflecting on the effectiveness of their professional behaviours, choices of methods and instruments, so as to constantly review the quality of their work and identify new ways of conceptualizing and planning it.

In a supervisory setting, it is possible to suspend actions temporarily and search for connections among different points of view and theories, motivations and choices, doubts and feelings, objectives and methodologies. A further focus of interest may be analysing the dynamics that regulate professional relationships (between professionals and their clients and/or among colleagues) in order to investigate their influence on processes of defining roles and

functions both internally and externally to multilevel structures (whether personal, professional, managerial, institutional).

Pedagogical supervision can play a strategic role in the process of constructing professional identity because it facilitates processes of communication and interaction among work group members, thereby enhancing levels of collaboration as well as individual and collective professional educational competences, making them visible and communicable.

All too often, social educators and pedagogues have difficulty in recognizing themselves, and being recognized, as “the main” professional depository of knowledge about education, running the consequent risk of delegating to professionals from other disciplines the task of developing the interpretative framework within which educational events are to be read; and thereby losing sight of their specific pedagogical focus and aims.

The scanty production (in Italy as in other countries) of thought around the theme of pedagogical supervision may be seen as reflecting this difficulty and the fact that educators are not viewed (do not view themselves) as legitimated to manage, and detain responsibility for, the specifically pedagogical aspects and elements of educational processes.

Elements of complexity

Supervision is a dynamic process, which is modulated according to needs and functions defined by a work team; it begins with the formulation of questions about meanings and the negotiation of objectives and contents. Supervision may be structured in different ways, according to the subjects involved in the process (individuals or groups) and to the supervisor’s professional position inside or outside of the organization; in terms of timing, it may be conducted periodically (generally, once a month for a year, or more) or intensive (concentrated in a particular moment of need or crisis).

In supervision, it is possible to work at a technical job-related level, focusing on managerial or methodological competences, or at a personal level, targeting professional well-being. By trying to identify connections among different levels, work groups develop the ability to compare many different points of view and meanings (both individual and collective) and to negotiate possible new interpretations of reality and options for future intervention. Furthermore, social educators acquire competence in performing complex analyses of how specific educational actions correspond to the social mandate received, in terms of the meaning and coherence of given projects, objectives, methodologies etc.

The constant intersection between the personal and professional dimensions, problems and reflections involved in social work require both a psychological and a pedagogical approach. In fact, only a functional balance in the emotional involvement inherent to educational relationships can safeguard the characteristics of authenticity and asymmetry, through a highly complex combination of respect, awareness of limits and responsibilities in caring for (not invading) an individual’s personal freedom to make plans and decisions. Emotions and the affective implications of educational relationships could be perceived as a potential problem needing to be brought under control, and when it comes to reflection, this often takes precedence over the educational subject’s needs and objectives.

Psychological supervision focuses on the individual and collective feelings surrounding an educational experience; it analyses personal and relational dynamics, in order to point up their effects on personal and professional choices and actions.

Pedagogical supervision, on the other hand, stimulates the analysis of educational actions and events, identifying the elements that can make sense within an educational design and planning framework. Pedagogical supervision is not directly focused on practical problems, although it produces significant effects on praxis via the implementation of reflective processes that increase educators' levels of awareness and professionalism. It is a tool which supports the process of constructing a professional identity and role, is transversal to different areas and contexts of intervention, and tends to produce pedagogical knowledge. The last-mentioned aspect is of support to educators in that it enables them to observe, analyse and critically reflect on their own work in pedagogical terms.

Undeniably, educational events are so complex that it is useful to adopt a multidisciplinary approach with a view to extending the framework of analysis to include a range of possible interpretations, meanings and forms of intervention. However, the risk of tacitly invading the territory of another discipline or discouraging it from being itself should not be underestimated. Each discipline has its own identity and theoretical framework defining the structural elements through which its professionals produce different interpretations of reality and envisage different possibilities for transformation.

In socio-educational services, multiple meta-reflective experiences related to professional lifelong learning are available: counselling, training, coordination, supervision and research processes.

These practices are related to each other, with (potentially confusing) areas of overlap, in that they share some functions, such as enhancing professional identity and role, developing skills and generating connections between theory and praxis. Taken together, these practices form a second level of professionalism. What they mainly have in common is the aim of giving professional support to social workers and the tendency to be made up of transversal elements, related to problem-solving, activating connections among different organizational and institutional levels, recognizing the potential to change educational experiences. The creation of learning contexts leads to a growth in knowledge about educational phenomena, which in turn raises the level of effectiveness and coherence of educational interventions.

Despite their similarities, the different practices are modulated and structured differently, as a function of the role of the actors involved in the process (which defines the type of intervention), the objectives and expected results.

Thus, it would be useful, in terms of providing greater clarity, to gain insight into the following issues:

1. a coordinator's professional function is close to an organizational function; the task of monitoring the effectiveness of working practices is effected by examining in depth how work methods are analyzed, evaluated and implemented. It may be argued that coordination should replace pedagogical supervision; however, are institutions conscious of the risks that such a policy would bear in terms of control effects, by virtue of which organizational objectives might be given priority over educational ones?
2. social workers need to hone their ability to recognize the potential of their peculiar way of working and to fill the existing gaps in their theoretical and methodological approaches; they therefore turn to various other professionals seeking specific pieces of information or tools, that are useful for interpreting the environment in which they operate and or identifying different possibilities for correction. Supervision, counseling, training and research all meet these needs, so they should be viewed as complementary elements within a single supportive macro-practice. Alternatively, is it possible to distinguish between different meta-reflective settings, objectives

and activities, so that these practices become instruments with specific differences that are appropriate for use in different situations?

Specific characteristics of pedagogical supervision

The content of pedagogical supervision can be multiple and complex, but essentially it revolves around three main focal points: educational intentionality, ownership of educational interventions and the activation of relational and educational resources.

Educational intervention cannot be implemented randomly and should not be a mere reaction to contingent factors. Thus, pedagogical supervision must approach the analysis of work methods in terms of approaches, multilevel relationships and organization. In so doing, it fosters the taking on of higher levels of responsibility and autonomy in operating and making decisions. The main objective of pedagogical supervision, therefore, is to promote educators' professional development, helping them to become more aware of their own method of intervention and to attain knowledge and skills pertaining to specific educational fields (in particular: educational design and planning, the educational relationship, competence in collaborating with their work teams, the activation of territorial resources and networks, the production of professional documentation). By creating opportunities for the re-elaboration of experience, pedagogical supervision enables educators to produce a reflective, complex and systematized knowledge, which provides praxis with theoretical depth and brings out their specific educational role in interaction with other professionals.

Therefore supervision stimulates the exercise of self-assessment skills, with increasing awareness of personal and professional limits and resources, doubts and resistances, which can produce implicit opposition if not taken into due consideration in negotiation processes. The supervisory setting has a communication structure that facilitates resolution of the difficulties inherent in the process of comparing multiple viewpoints on events and educational problems; fragmentation may be reconstructed into a "partial and temporary knowledge" that reduces the distance between representations, proposed objectives (sometimes not realistically achievable) and the feasible possibilities for change displayed in a given situation.

Indeed, pedagogical supervision generally elicits expression of a strong need to think about educational practices, in terms of recognizing their meaning. Educators pose a complex question, which is sometimes confused, because of a concatenation of different levels of personal and professional needs (including the need for reassurance). This question needs to be analysed, often broken down into its various parts and reformulated. Supervision stimulates a functional analysis of multiple contexts, guided by a transversal research approach, although moving from the peculiar characteristics of given situations, themes and techniques; it facilitates the production of conceptualizations and the activation of meta-reflective processes required to develop deep, transferable and communicable pedagogical knowledge.

The professional figure of the supervisor is crucial, not only because his/her conceptual framework directs the focus of attention onto educational processes, but also because his/her methods of constructing the setting and managing work group dynamics (sometimes complex and compromised) determine the course and the effectiveness of the supervisory process. The supervisor, then, is required to possess abstraction and modeling abilities, which beginning from the analysis of a particular case, situation or contest and, using multiple conceptual and experiential contributions, lead to a theorization. The introduction of new models of observation and analysis can open up many possibilities for interpretation and operational strategies;

reflexive processes are found to be fundamental and must be effective at several levels: in relation to communicative and relational dynamics, planning and decision making strategies, methodological and organizational choices, and speculative and theoretical assumptions.

Supervisors must acquire a complete knowledge of theoretical contents, in order to use them implicitly in discussing specific situations; they must also have mastered appropriate methodologies for helping work teams to form their own local theories on educational phenomena.

Nowadays organizations continuously face new social emergencies, driven by both relational and economic factors, and therefore analyzing clients' needs is a complex task; the current precariousness in employment creates a rapid turnover of professionals in social working groups too, and so managerial aspects become predominant and structured reflexivity is not always guaranteed. Supervision thus becomes essential, because it can reactivate the circuits of connection and exchange between theories and praxis, and between explicit and implicit knowledge, reconnecting actions to educational meanings and enhancing possibilities for change, through a continuous balancing and rebalancing of mental movements.

Currently in Italy, supervisors are responsible for their own self-training. However, a second-level learning and training course as well as a professional lifelong learning process for supervisors would be highly desirable if complete professional mastery of specific knowledge and transversal skills is to be ensured.

Looking ahead: future prospects

The crisis that the welfare state is currently undergoing has repercussions for social work, which is forced to take charge of emergency situations characterized by multiple and increasingly complex problems, despite scarce resources. The welfare approach to social problems is proving shortsighted and can undermine the educational and transformational scope of interventions, reducing their quality.

In fact, the aim to provide widely available but standard assistance leads to a focus on techniques rather than on the quality of personal relationships and on intentionally educational experiences created by taking into consideration the characteristics of specific contexts; this approach does not recognize complexity, but encourages simplification, which is functional to making organization manageable. Consequently, the scope for thought and experimentation are reduced, with weaker interconnections being formed between knowledge and practices.

Pedagogical supervision, therefore, can be a valuable resource not only for the wellbeing of individual social workers, but also for the routine maintenance of quality standards in social services and for their continuous redesign, in terms of defining their social mission, educational transformative objectives and coherent structural organization. A work team may be guided to awareness of its mode of intervention through identification of a repertoire of operational tools, but above all by development of its communication, reflective and re-elaboration skills. Indeed, educators' professionalism is strengthened by ensuring that their specific knowledge of a variety of educational situations and contexts is recognized, along with their ability to comparatively analyze social representations, the personal characteristics of subjects involved in an educational scenario and the complex overall system of culture, ethics and values. Therefore, all experience must be related to the (individual and collective) meanings and motivations within which it arises and which define its perceived worth; it follows that reflective and self-reflexive practices must be recognized as indispensable tools for educational social work.

In this logic, pedagogical supervision becomes a professional instrument, that should not be considered an optional extra to be availed of in cases of emergency, but should be permanently in use because it is recognized, above all, as a professional responsibility that every educator and work team, service and organization should take upon themselves and expect from others.

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