The Supervision of socio-educational practitioners: an integrated model

La supervisione dei professionisti socio-educativi: un modello integrato

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

L'articolo presenta i risultati della ricerca-azione condotta nell'ambito del progetto di dottorato in teoria e ricerca educativa presso il Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione dell'Università di Roma Tre. La ricerca ha inteso sperimentare un modello di supervisione a partire dalla cornice teorica dell'Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), rivolto a studenti universitari del corso di laurea in Scienze dell'Educazione, educatori professionali socio-pedagogici e pedagogisti. L'elaborazione del modello C.C.A.I.I. è avvenuta nel rispetto di un dialogo continuo tra teoria e prassi entro cui, a partire dall'esperienza dei partecipanti, sono state indagate e sistematizzate alcune caratteristiche originali della proposta discussa in questo lavoro. Il contributo, dopo aver illustrato la metodologia della ricerca, si soffermerà, sull'analisi dei risultati della ricerca-azione volti a confermare struttura e peculiarità di un modello di supervisione ad orientamento Appreciative.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from an Action Research project conducted for a doctoral degree. It tests the specific effects of educational supervision through the approach of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Supervision was offered to various groups: university students of a degree course in Education Sciences, social workers without a degree and practitioners, pedagogues and social professional educators. The interaction with them progressively shaped and improved a model proposal of social educational supervision practice. This paper gives an overview of the methods used and of results of the participative research process. It allows conclusions concerning the possibility of using the AI framework for providing supervision in social educational settings.

This research is based on an analysis that compared the state of -art practices of the pedagogical professions in 21 European countries. This also focused in greater detail on recent Italian legislation which began to define and recognise in law the professional profiles of educators and specifically the socio-pedagogical professional educator with consequent implications for training.

A survey of available national and international sources revealed an inhomogeneous professional profile of these professions between the different European states regarding the study programmes and the roles and functions performed by socio-pedagogical professionals.

With the Italian school reform 0f law 107/2015, implemented in 2017, an integrated education system was established from birth to age six. Responsibility for Kindergarten

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passed from family services to national formal education. The ages 0-6 system emphasises its educational orientation by installing the specialist figure of the socio-pedagogical professional.

The uncertainty arising from an the absence of a unified professional policy, and the consequent disorientation of people employed in the pedagogical sector, already identified in the research by Paolo Orefice (Orefice & Corbi, 2017) were further confirmed by a survey of over 70 meetings of professionals meeting regularly as a network called 'The Pedagogical Café' which this author founded in 2015. It evidenced the feelings of disempowerment induced by the lack of representation at the institutional level, the scarce availability of resources and professional tools that can be used in the field, and the perception of a subordinate role compared to other professionals in multidisciplinary teams. The narratives of participants pointed out an orientation towards detecting shortcomings and risk factors in how they handled situations rather than highlighting and enhancing their competences and latent potential.   In view of these findings, it was deemed useful to test the device of socio-educational supervision as a possible way of responding better to the need for better legitimation, technical-operational competences and not least the mental and physical health protection of pedagogical professionals. As Inskipp and Proctor state (Bannink, 2015) the role of supervision is that of "a working alliance between the supervisor and the operator" whose –"objective (...) is to allow the operator to acquire ethical skills, trust and creativity so as to be able to offer the best possible service to his clients" (p. 4). Supervision, from its etymology, allows us to look beyond the present situation through a systemic view that involves the operator-supervisor-client triad (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). It originated at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century as a support method for charitable volunteers and the first social workers (Niklasson, 2006). Since the 1920s, approaches to supervision were enriched, as reported by Oggionni with psychoanalytic reflections with the clear intention to face and solve relational problems between social workers and clients (Oggionni, 2013). Although the debate was also vigorously conducted in England, Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, it was the latter that inaugurated the first training course for aspiring supervisors back in 1955. Cultural diversity gave rise to a multitude of models with two main orientations (Osvat, 2014):

1. The Anglo-Saxon model. Centered on administrative and control functions of the supervision process, it is aimed at institutional tasks, focusing on the evaluation of services rendered by the operators. The supervisor is generally internal and a member of the operational or managerial staff with direct responsibility for the quality of the service to users. This model is adopted mainly in the United States but also in European countries such as Romania.

2. The European Model. Of Dutch origin, it focuses on personal development and learning of skills by the operator and is the first model that identifies the supervisor as a professional outside the agency. It addresses the support for professionals on two interconnected levels of self-improvement, it examines professional intervention methods in the helping relationship, and it supports the professional in dealing with personal aspects concerning anxieties, difficulties, turning points and inevitable mixes

between the individual experiences of the operator and the projection of the latter on the narratives of their users that influence the quality and effectiveness of the helping relationship.

The choice between models largely depends on the intended goal of supervision. The support for professional competence can take the form of one-to-one or group consultations. In the latter case, organising supervision meetings can be entrusted to an expert supervisor or to a group of senior professionals who question each other in what Hawkins defined as 'intervision' (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012) and that in part characterized the proposal of the CCAII model described below.

A further distinction concerns the choice between external or internal supervision, depending on whether the guiding interest is the personal development of the operators or the management control over more efficient organizational processes and whether the model chosen makes psychoanalytic or socio-pedagogical references. In the Netherlands, for example, there have been numerous attempts to develop an explicitly pedagogical model of supervision (Belardi & Wallnöfer, 2006) or to adopt maieutic methodologies such as the "Learning Hypothesis" proposed by van Kessel (Haan, van Kessel, 1993). Unlike in Italy, in the 1930s when supervision first spread, the psychodynamic influence was prevalent but over the next twenty years this made room for a maieutic function of the supervisor (Belardi & Wallnöfer, 2006).

Despite a convergence towards educational theories and practices, an exclusively pedagogical orientation supervision today in Italy is rare, judging by the pilot sample of my preliminary survey of supervision carried out for the following study. In can be however found in the wider literature on the topic (van Kessel, 1993; Pimmer et al, 2017; Zanchettin, 2009; Correa & Altuni, 2014; Brunelle et al., 1991; Oggionni, 2013). The central focus of the psychodynamic models, is mainly on problems arising from the relational transference between client and professional. This kind of methodological approach sees the role of the supervisor as that of a correction of the professional's functioning The didactic learning objectives focuses more on professional practice and the analytical one on the development and personal history of the professional concerned (Rock, 1997).

The studies conducted by Brunelle at al. (1991) identify the following domains of different forms of supervision listed in Table 1.

Distinctive features	Directive Domain	Practical-Cooperative Domain	Theoretical-Cooperative Domain	Self-supervision domain
Foundations (underlying philosophical assumptions)	Carrying out a specific function with precise objectives corresponding to predetermined tasks, need to exercise rigorous control in order to follow up on the expectations of the organisational system of the supervisee.	Carrying out functions with precise objectives where the means to their realization are available; need for practical support that allows the operator to better deal with cooperation processes.	Carrying out functions with precise objectives where the means to their realization are available but operators need theoretical support to find autonomous solutions to problems	Carrying out functions with precise objectives where the means to their realization are available but the operator is required to master knowledge and skills to find solutions to problems autonomously.

Definitions and purposes (sense and direction of the domain of pedagogical supervision and the intentions pursued)	Supervision aims to ensure that the operator reproduces given models of behavior and predetermined intervention strategies which have been taught.	Supervision in which the supervisor, helps the operator practically to solve pedagogical problems starting from the choice and analysis of the data of given events.	Supervision in which the operator consults the supervisor for the purpose to obtain theoretical knowledge in order to solve pedagogical problems.	Supervision in which the operator is entrusted with responsibility for solving pedagogical problems based on evidence from research results

TAB. 1 - SYNOPTIC TABLE OF SUPERVISION DOMAINS (BRUNELLE ET AL., 1991, P. 60)

Research method and theoretical framework

In searching for the appropriate survey methodology, the need to continuously integrate the information from the research field was a guiding factor that would enable the gradual refinement of the guiding hypotheses and recalibration of the design in progress (Ripamonti et al., 2010). For this reason, I chose the action research method as it aims, in according with Aluffi Pentini (2001) "to combine theory and practice, making research - or professional intervention - directly aimed at an action (...) to realise a transformation in educational, psychological and social contexts, according to structured criteria, which allow to continuously calibrate, to monitor, evaluate and periodically redefine it (...) – so as to make it increasingly more effective"(p. 1). For these reasons, the research phases were preceded by an exploratory survey concerning supervision in the workplace by socio-educational professionals. The questionnaire, developed on the basis the careful analysis of extant literature, was composed of 39 items concerning personal data, income, presence and frequency of supervision in the workplace, educational level and qualifications of the supervisor, type of cases addressed, individual, group and user-related factors that the supervision process should reinforce, skills and competences deemed necessary to exercise the function of supervisor.

Taking care to give the research an overall positive perspective and to foster professional empowerment, and acting on findings by partners in an international network in which I participated, I applied the theoretical framework of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), whose main focus is on what aspects ensure the optimal working of organized systems. AI does not focus on shortcomings or causes of disempowerment but tries to learn from and apply the best experiences narrated by the participants in the investigation process. Its purpose is to observe a living system when it expresses itself to the best of its potential rather than persisting on the analysis of deficiencies and needs. The epistemology of AI is based on Kurt Lewin's teachings, on socio-constructivist theories of generative knowledge (Cockwell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Magruder & Mohr, 2001) and on experiments conducted in the field of positive psychology (Seligman, 1996). Appreciative Inquiry evolves in four distinct steps: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny ('4D'). Cooperrider (2001) identifies the initial moment of AI (Discovery) as a discovery process within which "values, practises, experiences, histories, tradition, hopes and wishes [...] catalyse thinking and dialogue about the positive possibilities» (p. 15). The phase 'Dream' stimulates going beyond the known, by forming a bridge between the past and future goals. In this phase, stories and the vitality and strengths they contain are identified. The Design phase focuses on

planning the actions, tasks and roles necessary to actualize the desired objectives of the participants. The Destiny or Delivery phase organizes the implementation of the project and examines its sustainability.

For the present research project, modifications according to proposals of Cockell and Bloom were used. These introduce a preliminary critical phase into the AI structure (Critical Appreciative Inquiry). It anticipates a conflictual climate in first meetings when potentially splitting elements arising from differences in understanding need to be adequately addressed and a willingness to listen to each other's stories created. This combines the 4D model with its re-elaboration by Bloom (2008) in the form of Appreciative Advising, a particular form of counseling developed for the orientation of university students that incorporates Rogerian principles of positive and unconditional regard, empathy and congruence (Rogers, 2000). Despite the provisional nature of initial positions in action research, I hold with Delruelle-Vosswinkel that some normative criteria in the form of validated tools should be introduced (Minardi & Cifiello, 2005).In this research, I used two survey tools developed for the self-assessment of professionals. The Spencer & Spencer (1995) scales concern macro-categories of skills and competences developed by the worker divided into sub-categories:

a.implementation and operations (result orientation, attention to order and quality, spirit of initiative, search for information);

b.assistance and service (interpersonal sensitivity, customer orientation);

c.influence (persuasiveness and influence, organizational awareness, relationship building);

d.managerial (assertiveness and formal use of power, teamwork and cooperation, group leadership);

e.cognitive (analytical, conceptual thinking, professional technical) skills;

personal effectiveness (self-control, self-confidence, flexibility, commitment to the organization).

Answers were given on a Likert scale with measures ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

The second tool is the scale of perceived self-efficacy in the management of complex problems developed by the Institute for the development of professional training for workers (ISFOL). The areas of expertise investigated concern emotional maturity, the ability to set concrete and achievable goals, relational fluidity and context analysis.

In conducting the analysis of the narrative production deriving from the interactions during the encounters, I applied a phenomenological-emergency methodology (Mortari, 2013; Giorgi, 2010; Moustakas, 1994) to identify and outline the profile of a supervisory intervention model with an Appreciative orientation.

Implementation

The research was carried out in structured phases of pre-test, treatment and post-test, of the C.C.A.I.I supervision model (Table 2) in the logic of the quasi-experimental design of Campbell and Stanley (Campbell; Stanley, 1964). In between meetings I documented, in diary form, topic-relevant descriptions, intuitions, feelings, connections and possible

developments (Mortari, 2003). Sharing diary entries with participants during supervision allowed me to cultivate a systematic reflective reading of the collected data, creating a procedural epistemology (Mortari, 2013) of inductive and provisional working hypotheses, which could be refined in subsequent supervisory intervention methods during the research.

The four supervision and four control groups included students in training, socio-educational operators without a qualification and professionals with qualification. Participants in the groups were identified among students of a degree course in Education, professionals belonging to the network of pedagogical cafés and a foster home that had expressed interest and willingness to take part in the research. The supervision meetings were organized in four cycles. Each cycle consisted of five weekly or fortnightly meetings lasting two hours.

In the pre-intervention phase, steps were taken to:
- inform supervisees about the theoretical framework of AI and the experimental nature of the supervision;
- sign the professional agreement containing the objectives of the supervision, the duration and place of the meetings, the time schedule, privacy and professional confidentiality, the professional supervisor's code of conduct;
- authorize the supervisor to audio-record meetings and process sensitive data;
- administer self-efficacy and skills at work scales (Spencer & Spencer, 1995).

Interventions were audio recorded and later transcribed. For coding and analysis I used the NVivo software. In the post-intervention phase, at the end of the cycle of 5 supervision meetings the self-efficacy scales were administered again and the necessary adjustments were made to the supervision model.

Pre test phase	Intervention phase	Post test phase
Exploratory survey - Elaboration and administration of a questionnaire on the topic of supervision (101 responses received) Organization of 8 research groups, 4 experimental and 4 control for a total of 64 participants (29 GS / 35 GC) scheduling of supervision; meetings signing of privacy and consent to supervision statements Presentation and administration of scales Spencer & Spencer and Perceived self-efficacy in managing Complex problems	Five supervision meetings for each group (GS and GC) every two weeks Duration of the meetings 2 hours Exploration - This phase aimed at detecting signs, codes and expressions that are biographically structured participants and their implicit values (Orefice, 2006) - . Intervention - Starting from the experiential, conceptual, emotional, reflective worlds of the supervisees, the most suitable intervention profile emerged for responding. Data collection: audio recording, ethnographic transcription, first analysis and understanding of the processes	After five meetings - Administration of the scales as in the pre-test phase Analysis of the meetings - Type of feedback between the supervisor and the participants and vice versa; circularity and rhythm of exchanges; elaboration of empathic references structured on different levels (Gordon, 2013); alternative working hypotheses; conscious re-elaboration of emotional experiences. Implementation of the supervision approach based on the circularity of the investigation process: Diagnosis - Planning - Action - Evaluation.

TAB. 2 - PHASES OF RESEARCH

Each cycle of five meetings was characterized by phases of:

Exploration. Orefice defines this phase as "auroral" because it should allow signs, codes and constructs that are biographically structured in participants to freely emerge (Orefice,

2006). It reveals underlying implications and expectations members bring to the setting. This facilitates their questioning by the subjects to make way for new perspectives on their experience of reality.

Intervention/action. The supervision intervention, , aimed at giving space to the self-expression of needs by participants. The action then evolved within the experiential, conceptual, emotional, reflective and narrative worlds of the supervisors and in consideration of clues from the narratives led to the most suitable intervention profile in response. The flow of exchanges between researcher and participants followed a continuous relational cycle of rupture, repair, restructuring, reintegration and rebalancing, the purpose of which was to strengthen the alliance and the basic trust towards the supervisor and between the individual members of the group. In line with the AI method this process always considered the need to bring out constructive and successful components already present in the helping relationship and in the person of the professional while not denying the existence of critical issues.

Data collection and reflective analysis. Every supervision session was recorded and meticulously transcribed in the interval between one meeting and the next by way of preserving every punctuation of the communication in order to facilitate a deeper understanding in the next phase of analysis of verbal interactions.

The analysis of the recordings was intended to verify:

- the type of feedback used by the supervisor and the participants, and in particular the valorisation of the positive aspects of the reported events;
- the circularity and rhythm of exchanges between participants and the ability to involve the rest of the group in providing support to the one who presented a situation / problem;
- the elaboration of empathic references to identify diverse emotions that emerged by associating descriptive accounts with a specific emotion (Gordon, 2013);
- the presence of alternative work hypotheses proposed by supervisor and supervisees, with respect to the professional interventions implemented by the supervisee, to increase appropriate personal and professional skills;
- the conscious re-elaboration, by the supervisee, of the emotional experiences associated with the events narrated in supervision in order to be able to reread them with the necessary distance.

This verification allowed me to monitor the quality of the relationship between myself in the role of supervisor, and the supervisee, which is essential to create a good professional alliance and generating a climate of mutual trust and professional emancipation.

Outcomes

The data obtained made it possible to answer the research questions. The AI method turned out to be suitable for producing the desired change of perspective by recontextualizing the basic scenario of the participants, from problematic assumptions and representations of deficits in helping relationships with service users to the enhancement of successful experiences capable of furthering the acquisition of constructive skills in their

respective professional contexts. The feedback obtained, despite the limited sample analyzed, confirmed the encouraging results already obtained in the field of professional supervision of social workers in a comparable study in Romania (Cojocaru, 2010).

With reference to the second research question, some characteristics of the experimental approach to professional supervision with an Appreciative orientation have been outlined. The intervention device shows some distinctive elements of the supervision model applied attributable to a continuous exchange between theory and practice.

- The use of a CC.A.I.I perspective: Critical-Comparison Appreciative Inquiry - Integration. This favoured the combination of the critical-significant aspects present in the narration of socio-educational professionals with successful components through a continuous emphasis on awareness, investigation and integration. The process, following the first cycle of five meetings with the students of the degree course in Education, revealed a need to reshape the original 4 D Cycle of Cooperrider. The sequence of the Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny / Delivery phases could not be strictly observed, without forcing the participants to respond to given methodological prescriptions rather than freely expressing their professional experiences. It was also considered appropriate during the presentation of the cases, to give space to a critical-reflective dimension of the supervisory meetings This variation facilitated the surfacing of implicit meanings underlying automatic behaviours by the practitioners. (*Critical dimension*). Later it was possible to deal with feasible alternatives that emerged from the collective narratives (*Comparison dimension*). This prepared the supervisees for a transformative form of learning in their professional context. The Appreciative stage asks supervisees to develop skills of reframing their personal view on a case. The practitioner is invited to recognize what works well in relationships with clients. It is important to focus on the strengths of the client and to utilize them in difficult situations. (Niemec, 2017). By examining the relational process with clients supervisees experience the hermeneutic cycle that recognises and values positive experiences in terms of what it works well and why (*Inquiry dimension*). The new knowledge and the integration with previous professional experience will be helpful to sustain the supervisee during empowering work with clients (*Integration dimension*).

- The importance of the three Rogerian conditions. It was shown how important trust is in the relationship between supervisee and supervisor. Unlike Bloom's Appreciative Advising, the dealing positively with conflict was not limited to the moment of first contact with supervisors but accompanied all meeting phases.

- The presence of generative questions. This is a fundamental requirement to initiate and sustain the supervision process in line with AI as it helps supervisees to change lenses and filters by inviting them to observe their relationship with the client from different perspectives.

- Use positive language to recontextualize the needs of the supervisee. This concerns the supervisor's essential ability to reformulate the requests of the supervisee by transforming the critical-deficient elements into constructive plans and achievable objectives.

- Constant S.E.P. orientation. In relation to the functions performed by the Appreciative supervision, it is believed that these can be attributable, in an alternating, cyclical and recursive measure, to those of a supportive, educational and proactive type.
- Heterogeneous composition of the supervised group. Promoting heterogeneity in supervision groups (within the limits), made up of professionals belonging to different professional sectors proved useful. Given the nature of the theoretical-methodological framework of AI, this approach furthers the openness for successful experiences related to professional action, and allows a broader and continuous diachronic knowledge of socio-educational processes and daily practice phenomena.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these research findings help to fill the gap in literature on the need for and form of pedagogical supervision in socio-educational contexts, the need for which in Italy becomes urgent in the light of recent professional recognition and the spread of forms of self-employment in the not-for-profit sector.

The development and verification of a model of professional supervision intervention was based on the analyses of data and feedback collected in the field. The narrative units extrapolated from the protocols of the supervision meetings express in detail these requirements of supervision in different situations and professional contexts. The work therefore responds to the challenge, always present in the educational field, of reaching a synthesis between theoretical disciplinary knowledge and professional practices. The development of a supervision approach, included within a theoretical-methodological framework of the Appreciative type, allowed me to identify a professional support device capable of enhancing the educational work process, in its positive, constructive and propositive dimensions. without denying those problematic aspects which continue to receive the right attention and consideration by the supervisor and supervisees.

This journey, despite having led to answers to the initial research questions, was not without limitations and difficulties.

The first of these concerned the establishment and procurement of experimental and control groups. The choice to follow the invitation on a voluntary basis has in fact raised reasonable doubts about the trust of participants in me in view of the necessary sharing of intimate and delicate aspects of the cases handled and the personal reflections that would follow. I tried to respond to these needs by formalizing the supervisory relationship by signing a professional contract and a privacy disclaimer.

From a purely methodological point of view, the copious amount of data collected and analysed during the supervision meetings lacked a certain order. Not being able to count on a single narrative that would certainly have been more fluid, as is the case for the collection of life stories or individual interviews, the re-composition of the order of the interventions was particularly time-consuming. The resulting occasional fragmentation required a dedicated effort to reconstruct the sense of the narrative units that have been subjected to different levels of thematic analysis using NVivo software.

Finally, there is the question linked to the limited number of subjects who took part in the research. More participants would certainly have allowed me to gain further

information, ideas and deeper insights to implement and refine the supervision device. This research goal that will undoubtedly be pursued in future.

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