

COMMUNICATION IN SUPERVISION WITH SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS¹

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Abstract: *The paper presents a research on problems of communication in supervision of social work students in their practical training. Theoretical and applied concepts of the content and specific aspects of communication types in social work supervision with students are analysed. The research is realized with students from the programs of social work in Bachelor's and Master's degrees at the University of Ruse in the period 2014 – 2018. The purpose of the research is to identify the respondents' attitudes towards the supervisor's style of communication and interaction in the working relationship between a supervisor and supervised student. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of the empirical research reveals evidence of a sustained positive orientation in students' attitudes toward using by the supervisor in a constructive, positively oriented, dialogical, culturally sensitive, and non-discriminatory style of communication and interaction in a supervisory working relationship. Conclusions of the importance of the use of different types of communication in the supervision of social work with students are presented as one of the important factors for improving its quality and effectiveness of practical training.*

Keywords: *Supervision of students, Communication in supervision with students, Types of communication in supervision, Style of communication, Attitudes towards communication style in supervision.*

JEL Codes: *I23, I29*

INTRODUCTION

Supervision in the practical training of social work students is a structured, organised and interactive process characterised by partnership and dialogue between a supervisor and supervised student. The communication realised within its environment forms a working relationship with a positive and constructive orientation, which enables them to acquire values, knowledge, skills and experience, to integrate theory and practice, to increase their competence and independence and also cope more successfully with any occurring controversies, difficulties and problems which could potentially affect their practical and academic training and development.

EXPOSITION

1. Communication in the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee student

The relationships between the supervisor and the supervisee student based on an active, positively oriented and constructive communication are one of the significant factors for realisation of quality and effective supervision and practical training in the various fields of social work. The open communication between the supervisor and the supervisee that expresses trust and respectfulness, and is characterised by empathy and is open to critical analysis, is determined by researchers as one of the most important components of supervision (Donald, J., Saroyan, A. & Denison, D., 1995; Rautkis, M., & Koeske, G., 1994). The process of communication in the supervision of social work students is characterised by a certain dynamics and it is possible that controversies and challenges may occur in it due to differences of a certain nature (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture, sex, age, disability, etc.), whose overcoming requires that the supervisor and the supervisee make efforts and shoulder responsibility (Abiddin, N., Hassan, A., & Ahmad, A., 2009; Donald, J., Saroyan, A. & Denison, D., 1995). The two parties in the supervision working

¹ The paper was presented on October 25, 2019 at the section of Social Work

relationship should aim their joint efforts at creating an environment and an atmosphere of positive and constructive orientation, without being deprived of an objective and critical analysis and search for methods and opportunities to overcome differences and challenges in the communication.

In the some research, emphasise that the supervision working relationship is a product of the individual styles of communication of the supervisor and the supervised student and the presence of differences in them could possibly contribute not only to their mutual complementation and development in a positive aspect but also to the occurrence of difficulties and barriers (Dettlaff, A., 2005).

In their research, authors present other empirically evidenced and analysis-based studies of a conceptual model of communication in the supervision of social workers, in which they derive three types of communication: *communication connected with the realised activity*, *communication with a hierarchical exchange of information*, and *communication with positive relationships* (Hansung, K., & Sun, Y., 2009). In compliance with the conceptual and meaningful specifics of the supervision in social work with students and its common features with the supervision of practising social workers, we could present the contemplated types of communication in a modified manner and highlight their significance for the performance of supervision in the practical training of future social work specialists:

- The communication related to the realised work includes the maintenance of effective feedback between the supervisor and the supervised student on the schedule of performance and regular participation in the supervision, provision of information about procedures and rules for requests for and participation in the supervision, identification of goals, objectives and activities and provision of instructions for their realisation (Miles, E., Patrick, S., & King, W., Jr. (1996);

- Communication with exchange of information within a hierarchical system has its specific parameters in the supervision in the practical training of students. It is characterised by a subject-subject nature, facilitating and supportive orientation, pedagogical dialogue and realisation in an educational and professional environment and conditions. In it, the emphasis is on overcoming the effect of hierarchy and the differences in the positions of power between the supervisor and the supervisee and focusing on the building of trustful and respectful positive working relationships (Hubert, D., 1992);

- The communication with positive relationships in the supervision in the practical training of students is characterised by its assistance orientation, promotion of mutual trust and partnership, increasing the satisfaction with the realised work and participation in supervision, reducing the levels of anxiety and stress in the working place and the risk of demotivation and failure of the practical training (Murphy, M., & Wright, D., 2005; Newsome, M., & Pillari, V., 1991).

It is possible to interpret the communication in supervision in the practical training of students and in the professional work of social workers from the viewpoint of the theoretical and practical concept for it as a method of empowerment and a resource for realisation of activities (Conger, J., & Kanungo, R., 1988). The open communication characterised by trust, respectfulness, promotion of the participation in taking responsible and competent decisions in the supervision working relationship in the practical training in social work enables (empowers) the students to access resources, information and support for their use, stimulates and motivates them to participate actively in the process of taking decisions that are important for their practical training, gives them confidence in their skills and attitudes for active, regular and responsible inclusion in supervision and realisation of activities. We are not aware of any research on issues of the communication in the interaction between a supervisor and a supervised student in the practical training in social work being presented in Bulgaria, despite their topicality and significance. This determines our research interest in studying the effect of the style of communication employed by the supervisor and the interaction for a positive shift in the attitudes of the supervised students and their motivation to participate actively, regularly and responsibly in the supervision with a view to acquiring values, knowledge, skills and experience, increasing the competence and achieving professional and personal development.

2. Research on the identification of the students' attitudes to the style of communication and interaction employed by the supervisor in the supervision working relationship

2.1. Purpose of the research

Identification of the attitudes of the students in the Social Work specialties in the bachelor and master degree programmes to the style of communication and interaction employed by the supervisor in the supervision working relationship and its contribution to creating an environment and conditions for supporting the students in the acquisition of values, knowledge, skills and good experience, facilitation of the process of integrating theory and practice, motivation of active and responsible participation in supervision and promotion of their cognitive, practical and professional and personal development.

2.2. Participants in the research

The research included 225 students (N = 225) from the Bachelor's (88%) and Master's (12%) degree programmes in Social Work at the University of Ruse out of a total of 252 students in the period from 2014 to 2018. This shows that 89.29% of them chose to participate in it at their free will and initiative. The sample is unintentional and randomised and provides equal opportunities for all students to enter it.

2.3. Methods

The research is conducted through a 'Questionnaire for a study on the attitudes of students from the bachelor's and master's degree social work programme towards implementing supervision in their social work practical training'. This is an author's research tool which has been approbated and validated and which includes 7 subscales with 25 items. The analysis will be completed with data from a conducted interview which is linked thematically to the questions from the research tool. Respondents' answers about their stated attitudes are rated using a five-point Likert scale. To verify the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) has been used for the sample surveyed (N = 225) through an analysis of the seven subscales. The reliability of the scale is $\alpha = 0.746$, which reveals very good consistency of the questions. The students participated in the research based on informed consent.

2.4. Analysis of the research results in Subscale 6 'Style of communication and interaction employed by the supervisor in the supervision working relationship'

The subscale includes items for identification of the respondent's attitudes towards the conducting of supervision in the practical training in social work in the following aspects: supervisor's use of a system of measures for positive support oriented towards establishment of the supervisee's appropriate conduct; the use of a calm, business-like and respectful tone of communication by the supervisor in implementing the control and correction of the supervisee's inappropriate conduct; timely reaction, taking consistent actions and adequate measures by the supervisor if necessary to correct the supervisee's conduct that does not comply with the requirements; the style of communication and interaction with the supervisee employed by the supervisor, characterised by an expression of sensitivity towards cultural and other differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and realization of non-discriminatory conduct. In technological and methodological aspect, the subscale elements present one of the leading components of the supervision in the practical training in social work of the students, related to the interaction, communication, cultural and anti-discrimination aspects of the supervision working relationship.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirical data in Subscale 6F of the research tool, the following main conclusions may be drawn:

A. Over the research period 2014 – 2018, high numerical values were registered of shares of responses with positive attitudes in the items from the subscale, which are characterised by distribution within the 91.11% – 94.22% range for responses with a firmly expressed agreement ("I entirely agree") and with lower values of the positive and hesitant responses ("I am inclined to agree"), ranging from 5.78% to 8.89%. In the date in the subscale, there are no responses with expressed neutral positions and negatively oriented ones. The data provided by the quantitative

and qualitative analysis allows us to draw a conclusion that there is an expressed high degree of firm responses and agreement with statements about positive attitudes resulting in the formation of a stable trend with positive orientation.

B. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirical data in Subscale 6 allows for deducing information about a high level of expressed agreement by the participants in the research with statements of positive attitudes in the following aspects:

- Use by the supervisor of a system of measures for positive support with orientation towards establishment of the supervisee's appropriate conduct (Item 1). In the analysed element for the period of research from 2014 to 2016, a high numerical value of 90.58% was identified of the share of answers with firmly expressed agreement with statements with positive attitudes, which is combined with a low value of statements with positive attitudes expressed with a certain degree of hesitation (9.42%) and a lack of responses comprising neutral opinions and negative positions. The presented quantitative information and its qualitative analysis serve as the basis for argumentation of a high level of explicitness of the stated positions and of agreement with the positive attitudes related to them. The outlined positive trend developed in the next research period (2017 – 2018), which reported a significant increase in the numerical value of the relative share of the responses that firmly expressed agreement with statements of positive attitudes (95.40%) and in the meantime a double reduction in the value of the share of the positive responses expressed with insufficient certainty (4.60%). The outlined dynamics in the development of the respondents' attitudes confirms the identified positive general trend regarding the significance of the supervisor's style of communication and interaction with the supervised student in their role of an important factor for implementation of quality and effective supervision;

- Use by the supervisor of a calm, business-like and respectful tone of communication in performing the control and correction of any inappropriate conduct of the supervisee (Item 2). The relative share of respondents' answers responses with firmly expressed agreement with statements of positive attitudes in the given item for the period 2014 – 2016 has a high numerical value of 90.58%, and the share of the responses with statements of positive attitudes with certain hesitation – with low numerical value of 9.42%. The presented empirical data and their analysis reveal the clearly outlined positive trend, which was verified and developed in the next research period (2017 – 2018). A confirmation of this are the approximately four per cent of the numerical value of the share of responses with firmly expressed agreement with statements of positive attitudes (94.25%) and the considerable decrease in the value of the share of the positive responses with declared hesitation of up to 5.75%. In compliance with the aforementioned findings, an argument can be constructed about a sustainable positive trend in the respondents' attitudes towards the supervisor's use of a calm, business-like and respectful tone of communication in the implementation of control and, if necessary, correction of the supervised student's inappropriate conduct;

- Timely reaction, taking sustainable actions and adequate measures by the supervisor in case of correction of the supervisee's conduct that does not comply with the requirements (Item 3). The numerical value of the relative share of the respondent's responses with firmly expressed agreement with statements of positive attitudes in the given item for the period 2014 – 2016 was 89.86%, and the share of the responses related to expressing positive attitudes with certain hesitation had a low value of 10.14%. No responses with neutral opinion and stated negative positions were registered in the item. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirical data allows us to draw a conclusion about a positive trend in the respondents' attitudes in the given aspect. The identified trend developed and established itself in the second research period (2017 – 2018), and the numerical value of the share of responses firmly expressing agreement with statements of positive attitudes increased considerably by approximately four per cent and reached 93.10%, and the value of the share of the positive responses with hesitation decreased by over three per cent and was 6.90%;

- Style of communication and interaction with the supervisee used by the supervisor, characterised by an expression of sensitivity to cultural and other differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and realization of non-discriminatory conduct (Item

4). The established numerical value of the relative share of firmly expressed agreement with statements of positive attitudes in the given item respondents' answers for the period 2014 – 2016 was 89.86%. The share of the responses with stated positive attitudes with certain hesitation had a low value of 10.14% and combined with a lack of responses with neutral opinion and stated negative positions. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirical data allows drawing a conclusion about a positive trend in the respondents' attitudes in the given item. The outlined trend was verified and became sustainable in the second research period (2017 – 2018), and the numerical values of the share of the responses firmly expressing agreement with statements of positive attitudes (94.25%) and of the positive responses with expressed hesitation (5.75%) remained relatively constant.

In their responses in the conducted interview, the respondents submitted their opinions on the questions from Subscale 6: e.g., "During the traineeship in various social services, almost all supervisors helped us, sympathised with our difficulties and always communicated in a respectful tone and manner. I was never treated differently because of my ethnic background"; "In the cases when I had to make corrections in my work recommended by the supervisor, he never demonstrated rude and disrespectful attitude. On the contrary, I received more understanding and support and guidance on how to achieve the necessary changes"; "If there was a case of a bit more tense relations and tone in the communication during supervision, I tried to have some understanding, but this did not contribute our good interaction and solving the set problems"; "An organisation should be established in which the students will have a better opportunity to communicate freely and openly with the supervisor and gain more knowledge, skills and experience through their assistance".

The responses from the interview confirm the established positive trend in the respondents' attitudes in the subscale to a considerable extent. Opinions are expressed on increasing the efficiency of the communication and interaction between the supervisor and the supervisee with contribution towards building a constructive, positively oriented and culture sensitive supervision working relationship, contributing towards increasing the students' competence and development.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The evidence deduced from the quantitative and qualitative analysis allow for drawing a conclusion about the distribution of the majority of the values of the shares of the respondents' answers in the highest and related with positive attitudes points of the affirmative part of the evaluation scale in the questionnaire. Based on that, an argument is constructed about the stable positive orientation in the students' attitudes towards the use by the supervisor of constructive, positively oriented, dialogic, culture sensitive and non-discriminatory style of communication and interaction in the supervision working relationship.

In addition to the presented general positive trend in the students' attitudes in the subscale, it is necessary to note that the introduction of regulations in social work training and of standards for supervision in the social work with students will create the necessary technological and methodological basis for formation of the educational environment with communication and interaction components meeting the students' needs. This will contribute towards the optimal use of the various types of communication in supervision and to using their capacity as a method of empowerment of the students and a specific resource focusing on the improvement of the quality and the effectiveness of the conducted supervision and of the practical training in social work.

CONCLUSION

A factor of leading importance for the realization of the goals of the supervision in the practical training in social work is the positive attitudes formed in the students towards the style of communication and interaction employed by the supervisor, characterised by positive orientation, constructiveness, objective and critical analysis and a high level of general professional and cultural competence. It has a significant encouraging and motivating impact not only on the active, regular and responsible inclusion of the students in supervision, but also on the

communication and interaction aspect for supporting and facilitating learning, gaining good experience, realisation of effective feedback and partnership, correction of loopholes and coping with difficulties, increasing the competence and promotion of the cognitive, educational and professional and personal development. The achievement of a significant result in this respect will be determined by the timely development and implementation of reforms in social work education in Bulgaria.

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