



SUPERVISION PRACTICAL TRAINING PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

S. Nunev*

Department of Public Health and Social Activities, Faculty of Public Health and Health Care,
Ruse University "Angel Kanchev", Ruse, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

The article presents issues with social work students, enrolled in university programs with professional field "Social activities", which is defined as a key element of their practical education. Concept- and content-related supervision aspects of the practical education of the future social workers are being analyzed. The specifics of the supervision design have been outlined through particular patterns, and organization- and implementation-related essentials are presented. There is a focus on the conditions and the environment, which this type of supervision creates for the students in terms of recognizing values, gaining knowledge, developing skills, integrating theory and practice, displaying professional flexibility, variability and reflectivity, forming and developing a professional identity in the educational practice and study process. Within this context there is an emphasis on its key role for conducting more detailed analysis of problems and situations, for effective practical learning, and for gaining practical experience, which together contribute to higher quality of education and supervision.

Key words: supervision, social work supervision with students, concepts of social work supervision with students, patterns of social work supervision with students, integrating theory and practice, reflectivity, effectiveness of the social work supervision with students.

INTRODUCTION

Social work supervision is an integral part of the professional training and development of social workers, and of boosting the quality and effectiveness of the provided services. It is one of the social workers' key activities, throughout their higher education training and their career. Its significance is obvious at the time of social work students' training, because it allows for integrating theory and practice, and tremendously contributes to developing critical professional thinking and effective practical learning.

DISCUSSION

Interpretations of the social work supervision with students in practical training

*Correspondence to: Assoc. prof. Sasho Nunev,
Faculty of Public health and health care, Department
of Public Health and Social Activities, Ruse
University "Angel Kanchev", Ruse, Studentska St 8,
Bulgaria, e-mail: sasho_nunev@abv.bg

Social work supervision with students is perceived as a constant process, in which the learning young specialists get guidelines, support, gain experience, study and overcome difficulties and challenges in practical situations. It allows them, through mutual exchange, to display reflectivity in awareness and self-awareness, and to form their professional identity. Structuring the social work supervision with students in practical training is determined by a number of factors, which could translate into: developing a favorable cognitive activity, cooperation and reflection of the training environment and the atmosphere for holding business meetings; using appropriate supervisory methods; systematic active feedback; adequately meeting the learners' educational needs within the context of their respective level of development, their need to integrate theory and practice, and knowledge-and-skills transfer from both fields; achieving a cognitive value change; facilitating professional and personal growth;

creating and developing a professional identity. The supervisor makes education interventions, through which he supports and guides the students, and encourages and mobilizes them to achieve their tasks by taking great responsibility, to explore problems, which have arisen, and overcome the consequent obstacles. Supervision, which is used with social work students, represents a beneficial amount of information, which enables both sides to measure their progress in terms of gaining knowledge, developing good practices and associating with the values of the profession. It should be taken into account that the success of student supervision is related to two factors:

- forming and developing critical thinking in terms of detecting problems, receiving and assessment of information from different sources, having regard to different points of view, generating, analyzing and assessment of decisions and their relevant actions and behavior;

- using reflections as one of the major tools for an in-depth understanding of the practically acquired knowledge, skills, values, and the results from reflecting on them, their restructuring and integration within the quality of the training and the future career development. Social work students' development is tightly related to reflection on personal, educational, professional and personal level. With regard to this the reflection allows learners to become aware of: their current level of practical skills, whether they are satisfied with it on a personal, educational and future professional level; in which direction they need to develop if they are willing to amend the present situation; what methods and means they need to use so that they could reach a new level of development, which would correspond with both the practical training's tasks and objectives, and with their professional goals. Thus supervision could be flexible and various enough and it could adapt to the changes and requirements of the training and the practical social work and integrate thoughts, feelings, actions and behavior in a suitable manner.

Research on social work supervision with students' practical training

Supervision, which is used for teaching social work students, is a problematic area, which has been insufficiently researched. The first in-depth European research project in that area was conducted in seven universities in countries with different levels of expertise and experience (The

Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Croatia, Slovenia) in 2010 within the network Supervision in Social Work Education (SWEE) (4). Its authors support the point of view, according to which the supervision within the students' practical training is perceived as a teaching method, and they use the term "student supervision" to denote it. They consider it "academic-oriented" and distinguish it from the term supervision (in particular educational supervision), which is relevant to the professional social work (5). The research study is focused on searching for solutions to all issues, which are related to the relevant inclusion of supervision within the curriculum and to using organizational and methodological approaches for applying supervision in practical teaching situations. The findings point out that most universities' Social work Bachelor degree programmes in Europe provide supervision in support of students' practical training. Nevertheless the social work supervision with students is subject to various interpretations. According to researchers differences are due to its design, organization and the way supervision is positioned in degree programmes and curricula. There is however consensus between all universities on how necessary and helpful it is to the students, and on how much they could achieve by using it.

Social work supervision with students as an element of their practical education

Exercising supervision within Bachelor students' practical education is an integral element of the whole education process. Our understanding is that such a position allows for its educational functions to stand out, but it could not be concluded that it is entirely "educational supervision" within the context of it being used with practicing social workers. We could define it, in compliance with its goal-oriented nature, functional and organizational particularities, as social work supervision with students, which is directed towards creating and developing competent and qualified specialists in terms of its educational purpose. Social work supervision with students, in terms of their practical training, allows for gaining experience, which would enable students to independently work as professionals, depending on their reached level of competence. Social work practical training during the period of study is a challenge, which students face, and a sort of responsibility they bear toward their clients, the professional circle and toward themselves as would-be specialists.

This specific context allows us to point out that with students' practical education it is very difficult to differentiate supervision, which is interpreted only in this way and as an education tool applied solely with practicing social workers. Students' practical experience, gained as part of the study process, includes to a certain extent social work elements, as they are supervised by supervisors – social work experts or professors, and their common goal is not only gaining and integrating knowledge, experience, values, and developing skills, but also improving effectiveness and quality of the activities and services, which are offered to the clients during the practical studies and in their future capacity as professionals. Thus it is approximated to the professional social work and its typical supervision, and based on that we could continue using the term “*social work supervision with students*”, which highlights its educational function. Such an approach facilitates avoiding the risk of some negative positions, according to which there is a great gap between the professional work and the social work during the period of study. Such positions interpret practical education as something very different from the social work, which could be mastered only in real situations. It commits supervision goals to: personal and professional development; willingness for continuous learning; reflection on the gained professional experience within various fields of the practical training; perceiving the supervision not only in its rational dimensions, which are related to knowing the social work methods, but also in terms of the reflection on personal experiences, feelings, thoughts, actions and behavior. Its major element is using reflection for self-analysis of the individual's personality, professional activity and behavior, with an emphasis on education and achieving the relevant professional goals. Social work supervision with students is perceived as creating secure and appropriate space for studying and reflection, in which, on the basis of the gained experience, students could form a new vision for actions and constructive attitude toward education and professional activity. It should accompany the entire practical education of social work students, and boost their sensitivity toward their own and their clients' thoughts, feelings, actions and behavior and form a positive disposition toward the supervision. Thus they will be able to apply it in their future professional social work practice. This context emphasizes the need for continuous learning, which is also a typical feature of the

supervision with practicing social workers. Students need to realize that their inclusion in the education-oriented supervision would contribute to their personal and professional development, and to receiving support for work-related problems and issues.

Supervision concepts with practical education of social work students

Social work supervision with students is founded on the general term and concept of social work supervision. Its specific feature is that it is realized within a training context and there are evaluation- and study-related elements, which necessitates a careful analysis of the didactic aftermath of the evaluation results and their specific transformations under supervisory interaction. In terms of methods the social work supervision with students is based on patterns, recognized in the supervision of practicing social workers – psychodynamic models, personality-based model, development model, integrative model, system oriented model, holistic model, interaction model and consultancy-based models. Forming and realization of social work supervision with students is based on the following concepts:

- reflexive practice concepts – contemporary social workers are expected to have reflexive competences. Therefore, social work students' practical education has to create conditions for developing such competences during the period of study. That is a pre-condition for young specialist's future professional career. Students should be able to analyze their own thoughts, feelings, experience and actions within a particular work context, and to perceive them as “outside observers”, so that they could correct their professional behavior if necessary. Social work supervision with students could also be defined as a managed reflexive process, which is oriented toward integrating theoretical and practical education of every student and their commitment to particular resources in order to improve the study and development processes (1; 6). The reflexive practice concept is also focused on the supervisor's function and role in terms of encouraging students to analyze their activities and the gained practical experience, and to apply the newly-acquired knowledge and skills. It is within this context that the supervisor functions as a conceptualizer and provides facilitation to the learners with integrating theory and practice, and to consider this process as part of their continuous professional development. S/he also

needs to clarify, in an accessible way and through immediate examples, the functionality of the supervision and to encourage them to use it not only in their practical education, but also in their future capacity as social workers (2);

- concepts of integrative supervision, in which on one hand there is an emphasis on particular possibilities for integrating theory and practice (technical eclecticism and theoretic integration), and on the other hand – on the motivation and support for students' participation in the supervision, boosting self-confidence, creating consistent motivation for applying supervision and objective evaluation of the individual's studies and practice. Brought together those elements contribute to the professional and personal education of the trainee;

- concept of supportive counselling supervision. That concept is based on the systematic model, which is related to partnership and empowerment of the two participants, bringing in the forefront the interaction between a supervisor and a supervisee and its supervisory functions and tasks. The other dimensions are also taken into account as specific contextual factors, which have an indirect impact on the supervision process;

- concept of supervision's interactive approach – an emphasis on the essence and quality of the supervisor-supervisee interaction, and it is simultaneously influenced by the supervisory working alliance concept, which takes part in creating a relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee, and in establishing a strong emotional relationship, based on care, trust and respect. Supervision interaction model followers see the interaction as a major supervisory tool, and as the most important supervision element, which contributes to high quality results and process. Having in mind that, there are several recognized key elements of the supervisor-supervisee interaction, which are actively involved with social work supervision with students – responsibility, trust, power and authority. The concept of supervision interactive approach significantly contributes to the formation of professional identity.

Supervision patterns with social work students' practical education

The experience in the developed world and in our country indicates that the teaching practice is on the rise in terms of regularity and teaching hours, and its average share increases with upper-class students. It is aimed at enabling

students to gain knowledge about the basics of different social work fields and to reach a certain level of independence. This process is supported by a relevant social work coach who works for the respective institution or agency and by a university professor - the practical training leader. Depending on the agreement between the higher education institution, and the practical training institution, the functions of a supervisor could be carried out by one of the two designated specialists, or by an independent supervisor (4). The different experience in the specified field allows for the recognition of the following patterns of supervision of social work with students:

- complex model of social work supervision with students – the student, the social work practicing specialist and the university social work professor aim at improving the process of practical education. The supervisory function is performed through regular meetings, which are held at the higher education institution, or at the premises of the practical education institution, depending on the problems for discussion;

- the external supervisory pattern – one of its typical features is involving an external supervisor from the higher education institution for meeting the needs of the practical education. He has the necessary knowledge and license, and is in contact with the university leader of the teaching practice; he does not visit the institution of the teaching practice, and holds meetings with his students at his own supervision practice, which is separated from the higher education institution. This pattern is considered to avoid role overlapping of the teaching practice assessor with the supervisory university leader, or the social work specialist, which opens up possibilities and room for reflection;

- the internal supervisory pattern – social work supervision with students is conducted by a social work specialist. The idea is that s/he would be the most appropriate supervisor, as s/he would supervise the learner about an activity, which s/he controls and s/he is very familiar with. The social work specialists/supervisors interact with the teaching practice university leader, and the higher education institution involves them in supervision training. Students' practical training results are mutually evaluated by the social work specialist/supervisor and the social work university professor. Striking a balance between the role and functions of a supervisor, trainer and assessor is of tremendous importance;

- supervision in a group of equals (intervision) – used at educational institutions and agencies, or at social work institutions with limited experience in social work supervision with students, and with supervisors, who are ill-prepared to provide supervision. Students could discuss their practical experience in intervision groups, in which they are looking for decisions, and support each other upon facing obstacles. They work and study their work in intervision groups by exploring a module, which enables them to develop particular skills. The social work specialist or the teaching practice university leader (depending on the distribution of functions) monitor the intervision groups' progress and development, and assess their actions. Using those patterns stirs contradictions and questions whether this type of activity successfully attains the goals and fulfills the tasks of the social work supervision with students.

All types of supervision of social work with students are related to: students applying reflection, and gaining reflexive experience; professional and personal development as future social work specialists; setting the time framework in terms of regularly held meetings within a particular period of time.

The common organizational structure of the social work supervision with students with the presented models include: an initial stage of introducing the student with the practice-related institution, the supervisor and the supervision group; major stage, which represents the essence of the practical education process and of the student supervision in line with the adopted model and organizational framework; closing stage, which comprises of completing the time-limited training within a particular practical field and conducting individual and group supervision aimed at pointing out major issues, analysis of actions in terms of achievements and lapses, outlining future strategies for overcoming them and working on making a smooth transition from the particular field of the teaching practice to the next field within the respective academic term or year. Depending on the curriculum structure and the teaching practice organization, the social work supervision with students in the presented models could be conducted on a term or annual basis, and the duration has impact on the decision on the relative share of the individual and group supervision and on the transitional generalization stages. Students note

down their teaching practice and supervision observations in a logbook, which also includes self-analysis (reflexive element), aimed at their motivation to independently manage (on the basis of their resources) their own study process. Social work supervision with students is conducted in individual and group form, and there are attempts for striking a balance between the two of them, and priority is given to the individual supervision. Group supervision of social work with students is conducted in groups of 3 to 5 students, which are considered optimal and which provide appropriate effective work environment and conditions, beneficial learning, which is based on comparing different positions and sound mutual support. The supervision process, inclusive of reflection and learning, in groups of 3 to 5 students enables supervisors to more easily involve the whole group, to actively use dialogues in communication, and students could present their practical experience or unresolved issues, listen to their colleagues sharing experience and points of view, and better familiarize themselves with social work.

Prospects for social work supervision with students

Social work supervision with students has a clearly defined education purpose, and it is focused on students' effective learning and establishing and developing reflexive experience, easing the professional-personal opposition, and thus it indirectly facilitates their clients' handling obstacles and problems (3).

Our point of view is that social work supervision, when used in students' practical training, should be perceived as a major element of that training. Social work supervision with students represents a structured approach, which is in compliance with the whole interactive- and partnership-based process, and it includes monitoring, facilitation, consultation and support for the learning students. Its final goal is providing students with conditions and opportunities for integrating theory and practice, gaining hands-on experience in certain social work areas, studying and analyzing their own social work and professional behavior, and those of their clients and the activities of the social service staff members. It is in real situations, when they could not only observe the social work dynamics within different problematic areas, but under supervision conditions they could also try and solve new problematic issues, and learn and advance in the same time. The interaction between students and their supervisor

is as equally important as the interaction with staff members, clients and the surrounding social environment community. The role of the supervisors is manifested through their skill to involve students in those interactions, and to create conditions for diversification of the practical education activities.

The supervisor of the social work students, who gain practical training experience, focus his/her actions on the study needs and those of his/her own and the students'. S/he needs to possess skills for striking balance between supporting students and monitoring/controlling them, and between providing assessment, together with the students, and at the same time acting as an authority. Students' ability to actively participate in their own assessment correlates, to a great extent, with their reflexivity and self-criticism capacity. It allows for the assessment and the evaluation to become a single activity and a product of a supervisor and a supervisee, which distances it from the conventional asymmetry and makes them an important part of the experience, which is gained by the future social workers in their practical training.

CONCLUSION

Social work supervision with students is a continuous process and as an element of students' practical social activities education it has significant contribution to its effective realization within the context of the whole education process. It provides the learning young social work specialists, through a productive mutual exchange of knowledge, skills, values and practical experience, with possibilities to use reflexivity in gaining knowledge and self-awareness, and to integrate theory and practice by transferring resources from various fields. It

is necessary to integrate, within the educational practice, supervision patterns of social work with students, which are consistent, in terms of content, organization and technology, with the concept of the degree programme and the study plan, the academic staff resources, and the expert staff members at the practical education institution. Such an approach would contribute to better quality of education for social activities students.

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