

## **Traineeship and pedagogical supervision in group: learning contexts and dialogic-reflective tools for building educators' professionalism**

### **Keywords:**

Professional educator, traineeship, pedagogical supervision, reflective professionalism

### **Abstract**

The traineeship programme, grounded on a group-based pedagogical supervision and a period of professional experimentation in the field, aims at the development of a complex reflective professionalism, able to make the professionalizing practice an opportunity for personal formation and professional training, in the interweaving of narrative threads and discursive trails, which produce individual and collective learnings, supported by the development of critical thinking.

The pedagogical supervision, proposed in groups, supports a dialogic process between different subjects and worlds of meanings, which often seem to disagree and be not reconcilable; being able to compare different points of view and to analyse their apparent contradictions, in order to try to understand and to identify any possible contact point, is a competence that calls into question the skill in developing contextual critical analysis processes.

The generative potential of confrontation, therefore, leads to a common language, emerging from the progressive development of narrative and listening skills, in the assumption of a curious and non-judgmental attitude of research. Thinking over what happens, looking for different meanings, allows to dynamically reach different levels of knowledge, more or less explicit and conscious, in the intersection between multiple planes: personal and professional, emotional and rational, theoretical and practical, cognitive and operative ones.

### **Traineeship: observation and experimentation of educators' professionalism**

Educational professionalism and its contents are deeply linked with the dynamic transformations of contemporaneity, that modifies the outlines of the area of educational interventions and the framework of skills required to educators in order to respond, in an intentional and proper pedagogical way, to emerging educational needs [1].

The mastery of pedagogical and educational skills comes out from a continuous process of acquiring, in-depth study and integration of "general culture, psycho-social-pedagogical skills, competences towards particular sectors, and skills related to investigation, observation and research" [2], by finding a balance between theoretical knowledge and methodological experiential skills acquired on the field, where actively making experience of the professional role and reflectively proceeding with the construction of a solid professional identity [3].

The academic programs are designed to convey theoretical and practical knowledge that can support a functional analysis of social, cultural and territorial realities, as well as to develop pedagogical and design skills, methodological and operational abilities, organizational and institutional competences, in order to enable students to carry out complex programming and planning tasks. In fact, as professionals, they should be able to make a critical analysis of needs – according to specific characteristics of people and territories – to design coherent and effective educational interventions, to make the monitoring and the evaluation of the results achieved. They should assume different functions in relation to (more or less disadvantaged) people requiring support, accompaniment, facilitation, assistance, treatment and/or rehabilitation. They should take on the role of coordinator and/or manager of projects, activities and services through the integration and enhancement of local resources, often in collaboration with other professionals.

Facing with these complex professional tasks, a basic training is a preliminary experience, that has to be read and inserted into a lifelong learning programme: transversal and specific skills emerge from a recursive process of connection between theories and practice and a critical integration of partial knowledge; it can be

accomplished by a trial of the educational role and the acquisition of meta-reflective tools, leading to the development of local theories from experimental praxis.

The traineeship programme of the Bachelor Degree in Education at the University of Milan-Bicocca runs over a period of two years and is supported by a group-based pedagogical supervision.

During the so-called "*Preparatory Activities*" (first year of the traineeship, collocated at the II AY), students are divided into small groups, experienced as pedagogical settings, as well as situated learning contexts, in the discovery of the generative potential of dialogue and comparison between colleagues, by sharing ideas, doubts, questions and experiences. They have 36 hours of pedagogical supervision in group, held at university with different occasions of meeting with professionals: two symposiums and two visits to local educational services are organized and an individual one is required, aiming to stimulate in students the ability to observe and ask questions on educational work in its concreteness and complexity, made of materiality, spaces and times to organize, ideas to be transformed into actions, that has to be coherent with recipients' specific needs.

The setting of a pedagogically founded educational work [4] requires the ability to listen, observe and enter into discussion with educational concepts and events, questioning them in the constant exercise of doubt and in monitoring the risks of interpretative crystallization. Therefore, the development of a critical thought and a continuous practice of (self) reflexivity are central.

In the process of constructing educators' professional identities, the transition from a self-recognition of "natural" and personal attitudes (which act as an ethical-motivational lever) to the acquisition and consolidation of expert pedagogical skills is frequent. So, the focus moves progressively from the students to the professional role: initially students are invited to work on their motivations and expectations, needs and desires, prefiguration and professional representation.

The pedagogical supervision, proposed in groups, is an effective training method in structuring learning contests based on exchange and confrontation, which stimulate the collective re-reading of widespread educational experiences, starting from the identification of "traces of education" in the own belonging contexts (family, relationships, job...), in order to recognize primarily in the own life stories some elements of continuity and discontinuity. By unearthing personal ideas of education, it is possible to disclose thoughts and values people refer to in their practices, at different levels of consciousness; the comparison between multiple points of view leads to deeply discuss the meaning of the words without neglecting the unspoken ones, but above all to dwell on the never-thought hypotheses, on the never given explanations, on the possible answers to never asked questions. The deconstruction of what is (seems to be) known leads to the critical analysis of prejudices and pre-understandings, fears and perplexities, and makes possible to recognize their influences on personal and professional choices.

The progressive approach to the working field takes place through the mapping of services, aimed at getting students to know the territory and recognize its limits and the resources offered to citizens: students are invited to observe their territories, in search of their needs and by analyzing the related answers, in terms of coherence. In this way, they make a first experience of the effects of social policies, that are made concrete by the presence or absence of educational and social services and projects.

The in-depth observation of reality and the tension towards the multiplication of questions of meaning become fundamental competences, that support students in choosing the service where they intend to carry out the internship. A conscious choice is formulated by looking for a good balance between curiosity and knowledge, between (re)questioned personal motivations and courage to grasp a formative challenge that could lead to think about having a period of experimentation in a context never taken into consideration because it is unknown or considered too complex for a first (semi)professional experience.

The traineeship programme is based on a theoretical-methodological system coherent with the educational objectives of the Bachelor Degree and on a wide network of organizations of the territory, with which a close collaborative relationship has been created over the years, so that the students have the possibility to choose between several services where to be individually inserted in and to compare in group. During the period of "*Internship in host socio-educational organization*" (second year of the traineeship, collocated at the III AY), students spend almost 200 hours in the field and have a parallel pedagogical supervision at university (30 hours).

Over the course of two years, work objects are progressively modified in terms of contents and levels of study, observation and experimentation of the educational role in several areas of intervention; a pedagogical reflection on actions sustains the research of specific and transversal professional skills, tools and methodologies.

## **The group: a reflective and working team**

In both annual courses, the group is proposed and recognized as a central learning context; but in the period of internship in host organizations, the emotional involvement lived in the field puts the individual and collective experiences in disequilibrium. The students' levels of engagement are visibly different; therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the unconscious risk of splitting theory and practice, that could take place when the group is not recognized as a privileged place for their interconnection.

The group pedagogical supervision supports, therefore, the process of co-construction of a dense knowledge, promoting the integration of partial, specific and transversal knowledge, acquired not only through the significant experience of an internship, but throughout the entire process of learning and training. The core of the training proposal, therefore, consists in the assumption of a design logic and a research posture in approaching the academic and professional experience. A design logic is a foundational tool for educational work, not exclusively considered a technical-procedural competence, but moreover a general orientation of pedagogical reflective skills and actions.

Therefore, in this pedagogical framework, a group discussion can develop around many objects of investigation: the collective observation and analysis of professional tools and methods, like educational and professional relationships, teamwork, project design, documentation, evaluation etc.; the mapping and analysis of educational events, experiences and services; the exploration of educational contexts in their organizational and design components; the observation of concrete aspects of social work, taking in consideration the educational value of the intentional organization of spaces and materials; the recognition of specific traits of educators' professional role and identity.

At different levels of complexity, the group offers the opportunity of making experience of a kind of "team work": it initially can be seen as a useful collector of doubts and worries, that can be resized when found as recurrent in the other narratives; progressively it is recognized as a formal space for discussion and comparison in which it is possible to have common criteria for interpreting social problems and educational issues or for making critical analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of design and operational methods, observed in their similarities or differences. Each group, in fact, is composed of about twenty students inserted in different organizations; the heterogeneity of the services reflects the variety of educational areas of intervention and stimulates the adoption of a multidimensional approach to educational phenomena, seeking for an integration between knowledge and skills, methodologies and tools that are traced within the different educational services.

The shared analysis of some nodal issues of the observed educational practices, even in its organizational and normative components, allows students to highlight explicit and latent aspects of educational professionalism and to go beyond the superficial aspect of organizational problems, rediscovering the foundations of a professional knowledge that makes possible to understand the problems and to formulate coherent hypotheses of redefinition, management or solution.

A curious approach is considered essential and, being part of a group, students can develop a collaborative attitude, narrative skills and a professional language, increasing the tendency to deepen and understand educational events, assuming a posture of research, open to new questions and hypotheses.

Being members of a group, students learn to observe postures, styles, dialectical and expressive verbal and non-verbal attitudes, to recognize the dynamics of latent power and to develop mediation and negotiation skills. Observation and self-experimentation in the management of group dynamics become preparatory to the assumption of an educational role within a service, in which it will be necessary to manage in an appropriate manner complex communication and relational processes, with reference to multiple interlocutors and respecting the roles and the mutual boundaries.

During the two-year course, students also approach different writing practices [5]. Professional writing is a competence closely related to evaluation and the ability to make visible the quality of educational work, indeed providing guidelines for a possible redesign.

When a group makes the experience of being a working team, the disequilibrium between individual and collective learning processes, between theory and practice, is reduced. Furthermore, having a period of training in educational services fosters the interaction between the various subjects involved in the learning and training process; it allows the understanding of the professional meaning of educational work in its concreteness and complexity. Finally, the expert educators' support points to an artisan education, in which the knowledge is studied and reprocessed, but also handed down from generation to generation: the skills are mastered in practice, over time, by observing expert colleagues who convey methodologies, along with ethical and deontological models.

## **Pedagogical supervision: a meta-reflective professional tool**

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 behaviors, 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 theories and praxis, motivations and choices, doubts and feelings, objectives and methodologies.

The supervisory dialogical setting facilitates the process of comparing multiple viewpoints on events and educational problems: fragmentation may be reconstructed into a “partial, local and temporary knowledge” that reduces the distance between representations, planned objectives (sometimes not realistically achievable) and possibilities of active engagement in the creation of sustainable alternatives.

The negotiation of principles and benchmarks, through which make an analysis and come to possible interpretations of social problems and educational issues, moves from thinking over what happens, looking for different meanings; in this process, educators dynamically reach different levels of knowledge, more or less explicit and conscious, in the intersection between multiple planes: personal and professional, emotional and rational, theoretical and practical, specific and transversal, cognitive and operative ones [6].

Pedagogical supervision is not directly focused on practical problems and brings educators (in training and on duty) to assume a research posture: they are invited to take observational notes on their agency in action and to gradually engage the focus on relational competences with an attention to educational design and contextual dimensions, to the development of reflective skills, to the awareness of the political meanings, implications and value of their work.

Professional relationships, between professionals and their clients and/or among colleagues, are differently regulated; the various dynamics have to be investigated in their influence on processes of defining roles and functions both internally and externally to multilevel structures (whether personal, professional, managerial, institutional). Personal and professional dimensions, problems and reflections are constantly intertwined; therefore, in socio-educational services both psychological supervision and pedagogical supervision are in use, in case of need for a main focus on individual and collective feelings surrounding an educational experience, or on the educators’ agency and the coherence of actions within educational design and planning frameworks.

Undeniably, educational professionalism needs supportive reflective tools that stimulate the exercise of self-assessment skills, increase awareness of personal and professional resources, limits and resistances, disclose thoughts and values to which – more or less consciously and firmly – educators refer in their practices [7]. 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, and not invading, individuals’ personal freedom to make plans and decisions. A psychological approach, focused on individual and collective feelings surrounding an educational experience, is functional for the process of analysis of personal and relational dynamics, in order to point up their effects on personal and professional choices and actions. However, the differences between disciplines in the way of interpreting educational events – in reason of their own specific identity and theoretical framework – and envisaging different possibilities for transformation have not to be underestimated; as well as the consequent indirect effect of evaluation on the job. The risk of tacitly invading the area of another discipline or discouraging it from being itself is real and the choice of a psychological supervision, without a parallel pedagogical supervision, as the unique form of support request or given by organizations can be considered a warning signal: when emotions and affective implications of educational relationships are perceived as a potential problem, needing to be brought under control, social workers could risk to be more focused on this fear than on the educational subjects’ needs and transformative objectives. On the other hand, pedagogical supervision looks for a balance, by stimulating the analysis of the educators’ agency, enabling them to observe, analyse and critically reflect on their own work in pedagogical terms, identifying the elements that can make sense within an educational design and planning framework.

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. Therefore, supervisor has 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 on educational phenomena. The introduction of new models of observation and analysis can open up many possibilities for interpretation and operational strategies. Reflective processes are found to be fundamental and 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. Inopportunately, the economic and welfare crisis that is currently undergoing forces social work to take charge of multiple and increasingly complex problems, despite scarce resources, tending to focus on techniques and managerial aspects rather than on the quality of intentionally educational experiences. Consequently, the scope for thought and experimentation are reduced, with a weaker development of “reflexivity” [8], communication and re-elaboration skills. Pedagogical supervision, therefore, can be a valuable resource for educators in training and on duty because it can guarantee the routine maintenance of good quality levels in social services and support their continuous redesign, in terms of defining their social mission, educational transformative objectives and coherent structural organization.

In order to develop a deep and transferable pedagogical knowledge, processes of communication, “reflection in action” [9] and interaction among colleagues and professionals are fundamental because they enhance levels of collaboration as well as “reflective thinking” [10]. Through reflection, educators can “gain a deep understanding of the underlying intentionalities in their educational agency, and [...] to identify the generative elements of their practices and therefore to modify and revise them” [8]. Making conscious of ethical and contextual, cultural and social implications in the educational agency, pedagogical supervision can play a strategic role in the process of constructing professional identity and educational competences, making them visible and communicable.

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