
Existential issues in Supervision: Practical Discourse

Indrė Dirgėlienė

Dr.sc.soc., Lithuania

Dalia Kavaliauskienė

Mag.sc.soc. Lithuania

The article reveals the problem of the teacher's profession complexity and possibilities of supervising as a career counseling service in providing professional support. The emphasis is on the existential aspect, as the teacher lives in endless change and systemic reforms. The process of learning does not stop as the child needs help and communication "here and now", and the teacher must have human resources to meet those needs. All the society problems come to the school: suicidal risk, abuse, violence and poverty. These problems are met by teachers through their pupils, their parents and through the culture of communication and cooperation in the school community. These challenges require new social and psychological competencies, and professional support in survival situations of existential anxiety and professional complexity. The article presents a qualitative research based on supervisory practice.

Key words: supervisory practice, survival situation, social and psychological competence, professional support.

Introduction

With the intensification of democratic processes in our society there emerge new jobs based on human help. They demand avocation, awareness of the relationship importance and human resources to the quality of the professional work. The newest human care jobs, such as social work and nursing, are on the list of hazardous professions. Supervision as a professional counseling service primarily occurs in the field of social work, it comes to help the professional who experiences stress, existential anxiety and helplessness against the system of violence both in working with clients and in the institution (e.g., mobbing). This service becomes very popular in the field of social work. In Lithuania supervision is compulsory for improvement of the professional qualification of the social worker. Thus, the newest helpers in the human profession receive assistance in developing parallel work on these professions, they do research into the professional complexity and they search for new ways to help. Supervision in the social work field has been studied by many authors (Dirgėlienė, 2016; Dirgėlienė, Večkienė, 2016; Kiaunytė, Puidokienė, 2011; Naujanienė, 2010, and others).

And what kind of help do teachers, who represent one of the oldest professions, receive? It is also a profession of human help which requires avocation and dedication, and it is enlisted as hazardous job. However, there is little emphasis on professional support opportunities, and more recent courses mainly focus on acquisition of new knowledge and methods, with little attention paid to strengthening the teacher's internal resources. Maybe this is because the profession was built up on the "old" foundations and it suffers from painful ideological deformations during the Soviet period? For many years teachers have been treated as providers of knowledge rather than empowering and helping professionals. Banking learning style with the greater emphasis on knowledge accumulation dominated for many years. The reflective, critical thinking style is just about to get on the road in the today's school. Teachers experience constant systemic reforms, a number of changes that only seemingly improve the quality of the educational system actually lower the teacher's authority and leaves no room for creative professional dissemination. The school meets "the society coming" with its own problems, teachers also face the suicide risk, the problem of violence, poverty and the impact of parents' addictions on the child. The teacher is no longer the main source of knowledge and information. Nowadays much more is required from him, and painful experience arises when desires and environmental expectations no longer correspond to the teacher's abilities and possibilities. So it is natural that issues of life and professional work occur in the face of crisis situations where survival is difficult and requires support.

Social work as a new occupation offering human help is based on various theoretical models: systematic, cognitive, ecological, existential, humanistic and others. What theoretical models are aligned to the professional activity of the teacher on the basis of pupils' empowerment and motivation encouragement? Today's educational system and the role of the teacher is researched by many authors (Targamadžė, 2014; Bubelienė, Merkys, 2012; Kepalaitė, 2013, and others). There is lack of research on the complexity of the teacher's professional activity, but the positive thing is that there are publications on supervision as a professional support service for teachers (Abromaitienė, 2013; Brazienė, Aidas, Žukauskas, 2014, and others).

To speak about the existential context as a basis for contemporary school and teacher survival, reflection of meaning and creativity is relevant. The representative of Existential Psychology and Philosophy M. Heidegger stated that the existence of a person is conditioned by four factors: the basis of existential necessity: occasional birth; specialty, absolute uniqueness; freedom to choose at risk; the fundamental aspirations of life and the ways in which a person maintains relations with the world and people in it. The reception of these conditions base human existence. L. Binswangen highlighted four most important dimensions of human existence: physical (body) dimension; social (ratio) dimension; psychological (my personal world) dimension and spiritual dimension, the level of relation with the value (Anilionytė, 1999, 12). Thus the existential context works systematically at various levels and its effect is aggravated by changes and reform periods.

In modern society the teacher's authority changes, it is no longer a prestigious profession as it was during the interwar period in Lithuania. This situation is determined by various economic and socio-cultural factors. How free is the teacher to choose, to act, how much does he feel responsible for the situation, for the ongoing and endless educational reforms? Does he feel as a victim of a system cloak? How does he

survive this situation of changes? According to existentialism freedom means that a person is not an object emerging out of natural or social necessity, but "chooses" itself and forms itself in all his actions and behaviour. Consequently a free man is responsible for everything he does and does not justify himself because of "circumstances." The feeling of guilt for everything what happens around him is a feeling of a free person (Berdiajev, Fromm, Weininger, 1999). Is it worth to investigate how teachers manage to go through changes of the situation, and is it more often treated as a threat or a challenge? How supervision helps to survive these difficulties in the educational system?

The aim of the article: to reveal teachers' supervision experience in the context of existential themes.

Research methods: observation, case analysis, experience reflection, narrative. The following narrative meanings are distinguished:

1. What is supervision? It is unpredictable: insecurity – security – opening!
2. Johari windows are opening – confidence is rising – feeling guilty,
3. Positive attitude – focus on strengths.

Research place and time:

Practice of teachers' supervision in N city, 2016. 01. 06.

Supervision experience reflection

1. What is supervision? It is unpredictable: insecurity – security – opening!

Franky speaking, I was worried as it was the first meeting with teachers in the supervision. I was worried that the teachers would feel "everything is clear" (it was wrong prediction) they wouldn't want to spend time on the process (state exams approaching, so I understood how busy they were). But, as it often happens during supervisions, everything went in an absolutely different way. Definitely, teachers were unaware about this service, everybody attended supervision for the first time and did not know what to expect. After experience reflection I felt the duty to give all possible information about supervision as professional counseling: what it is, how it appeared and in which areas it is applied. It was minimal visual information.

Group participants were different subject teachers who taught History, the Lithuanian language and literature, art, music, ethics and religion, and two teachers of social education. They were teachers who worked in city and county schools, which (it is not a secret) are often in a competitive position. What about the group confidentiality? Were the teachers familiar with the principle of confidentiality and did they follow it as social workers? The preconception raised anxiety (it is no good to have it, but in social work practice I have repeatedly heard the statement that the culture of confidentiality in schools is really in bad state). There were 10 meetings scheduled for 4 hours. So the first part was familiarization, introduction to supervision as a professional advisory service and discussion on the culture of confidentiality. It was unanimously decided that the value had to be monitored. In other words, it is like a lamp above the operating table, it burns, illuminates and reminds of responsible duty.

The second part after the break was the first supervisory session. Inside there was slight anxiety and curiosity – what topics will come up? Will they appear? And how unexpected! A young teacher of the Lithuanian language and literature started to

speak about violence at school – children were violating the teacher. She was beaten up but she was afraid to complain, later she was screwed up at school. The teacher tried to talk to school authorities, but she was told that she was guilty herself and she had to look for ways to get to good terms with the child... The group was shocked and I was disturbed by such an unexpected opening. At the beginning of the supervision I always try to remind that we set the limits of opening ourselves, but obviously the opening with confidence gives us the best opportunity to know ourselves and the others, and in that way we find the answer how to grow. And it goes without saying that if the other can open even more than he expected, the group should try to save such an opening. A very clear situation: the teacher was alone with her problem, and those who could help her closed the door and clogged their ears. The school faces the most important facade culture. We all become witnesses of violent behaviour and a criminal situation. There are many questions in one's mind: confidentiality in the group, benefits of supervision, responsibility in the face of threats and existential crisis and need for help. However, we should remember the advice of Pope Francis: "...leave space and time for the work of Grace".

The teacher spoke long, it was important for her to talk, the group reflexed, provided feedback one could suspect sensitivity, various experiences raised the problem to the level of existential philosophy rather than the household talk. Other insulting problems: unhealthy competition between teachers, cult of facade culture, insensitivity, lack of professional support and lack of support in general. Frankly speaking, for a moment I felt slight shock from such openness, and thoughts about the meaning of supervision were ticking in my mind, I thought: what is its purpose? It was a specific case, but why did it seem to go beyond the limits of supervision?

At the end of the session we discussed all forms of support in the event of violence, I inform the group about the kind of theoretical material accompanying this topic. But there was a person with a specific and very dangerous situation. After the session we talked with the teacher and exchanged phone numbers. I suggested mediating this situation. The teacher asked not to do anything yet...

When I came home, the feeling that not everything has been done stayed with me. There was a concern about the confidentiality of the group: however, the teachers were from different competing schools. Competition is often driven by ratings, and schools often become hostages of the system. I decided to call everyone and ask them to respect the principle of confidentiality. I apologized for my anxiety and distrust. Maybe I went beyond my limits as a supervisor? Anxiety did not stop me from thinking – but what if something unpleasant happens to the teacher and if she decides to commit a suicide? She looked upset. She mentioned that she was hiding this situation from the family. Who would be responsible for consequences? I called the teacher and asked how she felt. Professional limits were already almost dissolved... but who could care about boundaries when the very human being was the case that mattered. We agreed to keep in touch with the teacher, she said she had not yet decided what to do. And now, 14 years later, in difficult situations I remember my supervision teachers from the Munster Academy (Germany). How would they react in that situation? I remember the words about the meaning of supervision: „Counseling, like art, is not primarily a means of changing the world but trying to live in it.“ (Weigand, 2010.) After that supervision I remembered Wahid Waigand's remarks that the origin of supervision is prayer, since self-reflection first appears in prayer. And supervision is based on

reflexive practice as the essence of supervision is meaning and reflection. There is an excellent Waigand's article "From Prayer to Professional Advice". Remembering the above teacher – she spoke a lot, talked very long, the group allowed her to do it and was not sensitive to ask questions...

According to H. Wagner (2010) the existential level becomes important in a crisis situation. In the wake of the crisis the need for a supportive social environment emerges. According to the author, in the process of escorting the creation of a relationship, social sharing, the ability to listen and "just stay together" helps to look for meaning, even though the situation seems to be meaningless. From the point of view of the author, the size and the exertion of crisis depend on the social environment. H. Wagner (2010) also emphasizes another important aspect in existential therapy, i.e., interaction: when you are close to a person during his / her crisis, you become unconsciously involved in the process, you become a medium between the person facing the crisis and the environment. I worried about the following supervision ...

2. Johar's windows are opening – confidence is rising – feeling guilty

The following meeting began with a circle of experience: what happened during the week, what they had come through and with whom. The teacher of the Lithuanian language and literature seemed suspiciously calm, it was easy to understand that she had used some sedative and it would become a tradition to accompany this case in each supervision ... The group would always listen very attentively till you finished, and then would give feedback. This case would encourage other members of the group to open up and see their situations through it... I observed the teacher, she spoke very little, sometimes she seemed to be sleeping (presumably the effect of drugs) and from time to time she said: "Super, super vision." Sometimes she provided a deep feedback in colleagues' cases. Obviously, it was a supportive environment for her at that moment. But it was also evident that something in that situation should be changed ...

The teacher of mathematics decided to speak out too, and again it was a case full of existential anxiety, fear, feeling guilty ... a suicide in school, boy at the age of sixteen decided to leave this world ... and only now, after the tragedy, the school noted that the boy had grown up in a family of social risks. And the teacher felt guilty because he was the most motivated mathematician ... He had received a negative mark for the previous evening ... and again the case seemed to require a psychological or psychotherapeutical help (provided at the school). So the teachers' supervision started in a strangely hard way... that was the way how things unfolded. There were various cases of teachers' experiences, tensions and relationships between their personal and professional identity. In this case sharing became a very important aspect: sharing feelings, experience and providing feedback. Those were not the cases with possible irrational arrangement of points and for "extracting" a rescue scheme. At the same time this is a gift to see how depths of existence open up and importance of the self-esteem in relationships to other people reveals, and most often it is the childhood experience that leads to it. Here it is important to speak about the psychological defense mechanisms – to recognize them, to name them ... to see oneself through somebody else's eyes. Johari's windows open: what was visible to you only becomes visible to others; you did not see, but others had known that about you for a long time – and then in an existential situation you suddenly open that invisible window yourself. The window also opens, neither you nor others

are aware about it, and unexpectedly you discover more and more about yourself in relationships with others. At the end of supervision when participants were asked to assess their experience, one teacher reflected a very beautiful supervisory process due to the opening of the Johari windows.

But what about the teacher who experienced violence? She seemed to be calmer but I could not forsake words of Saint-Exupéry: "...you become responsible for the one you get close to..." And again, it seemed I had crossed professional boundaries. I spoke to her and once again offered to go to the school and talk to authorities as I was familiar with the deputy of this school (maybe because of this I dared to behave more actively). With the agreement of the teacher I did that. There was a constructive conversation, it turned out that these guys had already been "notable" also in other cases. One of them had already been sent to the socialization centre for the crime he committed. The school authorities had talked to the parents of other schoolboys because due to their misconduct. I informed the teacher about the conversation. I came home and thought maybe "I was already doing a kind of social work here? Maybe I was influenced by the job of teaching social workers? Did I mix the roles?"

It was good that I went to Kaunas for a couple of days, to attend the meta-supervision. It was led by one of our teachers from whom we learned the mastery of supervision. There I presented my case, talked about my feeling which was like guilt passing over professional boundaries and direct interfering with the client's professional relationship. My teacher replied: "I would have done the same ..." I felt relief. Although, frankly speaking, I did not doubt in my own action. In fact for the first and foremost we all are people, not teachers, students, clients or supervisors ... And here the context of existential social work is already under way. D. F. Krill speaks about "personal power of a specialist" (Krill, 1978, 185). According to him, "everything depends on the existentialist attitude of the social worker and his personality's ability to make a strong interpersonal relationship with the client and influence him through it" (Bogdanova, Švedaitė, 2010, 12). The existential model of social work was based on ideas of existential psychotherapy and philosophy of existentialism. Also, the formation of this model was influenced by sociologists J. Derrida, M. Weber and M. Foucault, G. Simmel. Using the ideas of the philosophy of existentialism, the existential model of social work raises the human being, the meaning of life and the search for life' goals. It draws attention to the reflection of human suffering and failure.

What would existential pedagogical work be? Teachers were glad that topics of such a deep existence were covered in supervisions and they admitted they had never had such an opportunity. And how not to cover those topics if they were provided by life itself? I thought teachers needed social work knowledge: "the society that comes" to school has its all wounds and problems. And there is nothing new that children not only study, but also live in the school (the most important fact). An existential social worker becomes a teacher of life and strives to help the client to discover the meaning of life. Is this important for the teacher as well?

Why do I constantly return to existential social work? Because supervision first appeared as a method of social work. Only later it grew into an independent profession.

3. Positive attitude – focus on strengths

Supervision uses a variety of methods, sometimes the process is animated by role plays. Each supervisor has a special style, with an increasing opportunity to improvise and the use of eclectic style, when the role is adapted to the situation and exposed "here and now". There is no secret that beginners prepare an arsenal of games and actions in advance, and strive to adhere to the plan envisaged. Nevertheless, supervision is always an unexpected process. It is not always possible to know where it will lead to, though you try to control it in any way possible. That is what happened that time. I noticed that the teachers came tired and passively minded. I suggested presenting the problem through the game. The game is important not only for children.

So in this situation both organizing the presentation and presenting and taking into account the case in the three-dimensional space the individuality of each participant was even more evident. The teacher of the Lithuanian language and literature was especially peculiar. That was the teacher who had presented the incident of violence during the first supervision. She invited her team to reflect on her case of worry before the creative evening of her poetry. It can be stated that during that supervision there was a breakdown. In the case of this teacher there was a strong challenge to act in consolidating her strengths. The teacher succeeded in fulfilling her dream of presenting her creations and music to the society and six month period of supervision helped her to survive the crisis and accept the situation as a challenge to work. Two years after that supervision session I met the teacher on the street and she told me she was very successful working at the gymnasium at the moment. Work at the main school (where she had worked during the supervisions) gave her valuable experience. But she confessed how she would have survived that critical time if she had not participated in the supervision.

Regards the creation of a positive environment in a supervision, the cultural and interpersonal context becomes an important aspect. It covers not only the group's dynamics, but also the dynamics between the supervisor and the supervised. Ming - Sum Tsui (2005) distinguishes some aspects between the supervisor and the supervised: the supervisor considers the supervised as a subordinate to the organization (supervision will be focused on administrating); the supervisor considers the supervised as a professional (professionally oriented supervision); the supervisor and the supervised can treat the relationship as friendship (the most important support /backing function in supervision). There is no single and fairest view what kind of relationship should dominate in supervision. The experience of many authors testifies the fact that human relationship is more important than the artificial attempt to make formal relationships and the assertion that there can be no personal ratio in the supervisory process. Especially keeping in mind that this work is provided to help the person in his professional field.

To sum up, it can be stated that the school cannot be separated from society problems. The professional activity of the teacher is complex and it is strongly influenced by the culture of professional relations, that is the relation with pupils, colleagues and executives. Existential anxiety situations affect the inner world of the teacher, stimulate the search for essential meaning, develop and improve their life philosophy. It often requires specific competences. Supervision as professional relationship counseling can help educators to survive systemic change situations and regard them as a challenge to act. In supervision practice each case is unique and distinctive. The philosophy of existential social work is very close, valuable and adaptable to supervision practice.

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Eksistenciālie jautājumi supervīzijā: praktisks diskurss

Kopsavilkums

Raksts uzrāda skolotāja profesijas sarežģītības problēmu un supervīzijas iespējas karjeras padomdošanā, lai sniegtu profesionālu atbalstu. Uzsvars likts uz eksistenciālo aspektu, jo skolotājs pārdzīvo nebeidzamas izmaiņas un sistēmas reformas. Mācīšanās process nebeidzas, jo bērnam ir vajadzīga palīdzība un komunikācija “tagad un šeit”, un skolotājam ir jābūt pieejamiem humānajiem resursiem, lai šīs vajadzības apmierinātu. Skolā ienāk visas sabiedrības problēmas: pašnāvības risks, vardarbība, pazemošana un nabadzība. Skolotāji ar šīm problēmām sastopas darbā ar audzēkņiem, ar viņu vecākiem un komunikācijas un sadarbības kultūras formām skolu vidē. Šie izaicinājumi prasa jaunas sociālās un psiholoģiskās kompetences, kā arī profesionālu atbalstu eksistenciāla apdraudējuma situācijās izdzīvošanai, un profesionālu erudīciju. Raksts piedāvā kvalitatīvo pētījumu, kas sakņojas supervīzijas praksē.

Atslēgas vārdi: supervīzijas prakse, izdzīvošanas situācija, sociālā un psiholoģiskā kompetence, profesionāls atbalsts.



Indrė Dirgėlienė

Dr.sc. soc., supervisor, Klaipeda University, Lithuania.

Dr.sc. soc., supervizore, Klaipėdas Universitātē, Lietuva.

E-mail: indre.diregleine@gmail.com



Dalia Kavaliauskienė

Mag.sc.soc. in socio-linguistics, Klaipeda University, Lithuania.

Mag.sc. soc. sociolingvistikā, Klaipėdas Universitātē, Lietuva.