

## Reading 3-6

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# Supervision: the process of life-long learning in social and educational professions

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**Summary** *The supervision process represents one of the possible processes of life-long learning and development of an adult. This paper presents a developmental-educational model of supervision. It is a specific learning developmental and supportive method of professional reflection and counselling used in social and educational settings in Slovenia. Different concepts that explain learning and acquiring competence in the process of supervision are discussed. Special emphasis is given to the process of experiential learning (Kolb), learning within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky) and the process of mental adaptation leading to new cognition (Piaget).*

**Key words:** *Supervision; social and educational professions; developmental-educational model of supervision; life-long learning; life-long development; experiential learning.*

## Introduction

The development of technology and the frequent change of jobs resulting from it has raised questions about the ability to adapt to quick changes, to learn new things, etc. (Ivic, 1985). The supervision process could be seen as one of the possible processes of life-long professional learning and development in adulthood. The present paper attempts to analyse a developmental-educational model of supervision with the help of some theoretical concepts of learning. The main goals are to highlight those elements of supervision which could lead towards a learning process and to present some mechanisms of learning which govern the supervision process in social and educational settings.

In this context, supervision is understood as a specific learning, developmental and supportive method of professional reflection and counselling, enabling professional workers (school counsellors, teachers, child care workers, psychologists, social workers, etc.) to acquire new professional and personal insights through their own experiences. It helps them to integrate practical experiences with theoretical knowledge and to reach their own solutions to the problems they meet at work, to face stress efficiently and to build up their professional identity. By this, supervision supports professional as well as personal learning and development of professional workers.

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### Some features of the developmental-educational model of supervision

The model of supervision which is being implemented in the area of educational and social activities in Slovenia, has been derived from the Dutch concept of supervision and could be called 'the developmental-educational model of supervision' (Kobolt & Žorga, 1999; Žorga, 1994, 1997b). It emphasises two especially important elements of supervision—the experiential learning process and the role of reflection in it. It is characterised by the developmental, educational and supportive components of supervision, whereby supervision is to be understood as a personal monitoring and encouragement of the worker's professional development. The objective of supervision in the developmental-educational model is mainly to enable the professional workers to enter a learning process, assist them on the path of seeking their own solutions to problems they meet at work and enable them to cope with stress more effectively. Kadushin (1976) proclaimed that administrative and educational supervision share the same ultimate objective, which is to provide the best possible service to the clients. While administrative supervision provides the structure directed towards this goal, educational supervision provides the training (the knowledge and instrumental skills) which enables the worker an effective practice.

In such a model of supervision, professional workers and supervisors should not be interdependent and they should not be involved in a hierarchical relationship (e.g. a manager-subordinate relationship is not acceptable). That is why supervisees should come, if possible, from different working organisations or at least from different departments of the organisation in which the process of supervision is guided by an external supervisor.

If supervision is to be really effective, it has to represent a continuing process, taking place regularly and over a longer time span. The supervision cycle thus consists of approximately 15–20 meetings (except where a different arrangement has been made in advance because its purpose was to resolve a specific problem) and can be divided into three phases. The starting phase is the first five to six meetings, where the focus is primarily on making a working plan and a working alliance, establishing a relationship and making an interim evaluation. It is followed by the working (middle) phase, where the handling of specific working experiences is most intensive. The final phase consists of the last two or three meetings, where the participants finish unfinished matters, make the final evaluation, mark paths for future learning and say goodbye to each other.

The supervision can be individual or as a group. The optimal size of the group in which each member can learn efficiently is between four and six members. If supervision is individual, the duration of one session is usually 1–1.5 hours, while for the group supervision 2–3 hours are needed.

If possible, the supervision group should consist of workers from different institutions, who meet only for supervision sessions. In such a case they can talk about their worries, fears, work problems and mistakes much more openly and with greater freedom. The group can include workers from different professions and also from different fields of work (e.g. schools, residential care homes, social welfare centres, kindergartens, etc.). I had a very interesting experience with a certain supervision group which included a manager, three counsellors and two educators, all working in residential care homes and group homes of different institutions. They were not interdependent and they were performing quite different jobs. Soon they realised that the different roles in their placement provided a good opportunity for all members of the group to see the problems discussed in the supervision session from different points of view. The result was that they began to think more broadly, they became familiar with the problems of their superior, subordinates and/or colleagues from other working positions, and were better able to take into account their arguments when making their professional decisions. There were more options, more approaches to the problem, more

levels of thinking, all of which enriched the group considerably. But, it was important that they were not involved in any kind of hierarchical relationships.

There is a wide range of different possibilities, but usually we cannot form a group which would completely fulfil the optimal conditions, so we should be aware of the possible pitfalls that could arise in each specific group.

The structure of the supervision meeting is the so-called 'filling in a sandwich' (Atherton, 1986, p. 186), where the first slice is the opening (worm out, agreement about the precise structure of the whole session, reflections on the previous session), the second slice is the attainment of closure (the chance to say something that members were not able to say during the meeting, a short analysis of the meeting, feedback to each other, etc.) and the filling is the work on the concrete supervision material (professional experience).

At the supervision meeting, we usually choose and then present such an experience from our professional life, which we cannot explain to ourselves, which we are constantly emotionally and mentally involved with, or we simply wish to learn from. In connection with this experience we also formulate a specific question or a series of questions we then try to answer in the supervision process.

That means that our experience serves as learning material. The supervisor's role is then to reshape the story from our professional life so as to enable us to learn about ourselves and our professional functioning from it. Once we have told the story in which we describe our experience in great detail and are helped by the supervisor, the supervisor leads us on in our reflection about the experience.

We reflect on the causes and circumstances that have led to the experience or have served as background for it. We discover what we were trying to achieve, why we acted in a certain way or what has influenced our decisions. What have been the consequences of this action for us, for the client, his/her family or for our colleagues? We also bring to light our feelings and what we have experienced at work, as well as the feelings of the client or co-worker. In the reflection process we are able to contemplate the experiences from a distance. We can thus meet with the background of our action and the forces which have, again and again, led us to behavioural patterns we might not like nor are they professionally adequate. Reflecting on a concrete experience we can face our defences, emotional contents and behavioural styles. We can recognise our implicit theories, underlying attitudes and values directing our actions and emotional responses, as well as define the frame of reference through which we perceive the events and behaviour of others. In the supervision process we discover the true meaning of a certain event for ourselves personally and how it has influenced our professional action.

Once we have recognised the meaning of an experience or an event, we frequently come to the realisation that it is actually an experience of several generations, which has already been recorded in numerous professional papers. It is, however, necessary that we come to such an enlightenment by ourselves. Once the experience and its meaning have been integrated, they become our wisdom. This wisdom is not static in nature because in the process of integration we constantly have to review and sort our knowledge, which transforms our cognitive structure. In this way new theoretical knowledge and new cognitions, which we acquired through the reflection of the existing experiences in the process of professional development, become integrated with the former schemes of behaviour and perception, developing into different and new patterns of professional functioning and convictions.

In thus conceptualised supervision, the learning process of professional workers must be of essential importance. Actually, the aim of supervision is to engage workers in a learning process, helping them to integrate what they are doing, feeling and thinking. It connects practical experiences with theoretical knowledge and through them combines work with study, enables the transfer of theory into practice and encourages the learning of an

autonomous action. In this way it contributes to the professional and personal development of a professional worker. That means that in supervision, work, education and personal development are linked together through the process of experiential learning.

Kolb (1984), the founder of experiential learning, defines learning as a process, in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Its basic components are experience and its transformation. The perception of experience does not suffice for learning, something must rather be done with it. The use of experience in the supervision process corresponds to Kolb's model of learning as a cyclical process in which four activities interact: the concrete experience, its reflection, its abstract conceptualisation and experimentation.

Kolb stresses that the learning process can begin at any point of this circle but it should pass through all four phases. Hence, in supervision the learning process should typically begin with practical experience the worker acquires in performing his/her job. It then proceeds along the four activities in the following way:

- (1) concrete experience: in supervision this refers to the account of the concrete work experience, where the event is carefully described (supervision material);
- (2) reflection of the experience or thinking about it: becoming aware, analysing and reflecting about the factors which influenced the experience and the individual's role in it;
- (3) abstract conceptualisation or searching for the meaning of the experience: comparing and searching for possible connections between the reflected experience and other past experiences (one's own or the experiences of colleagues), linking this with theoretical knowledge, attitudes, etc;
- (4) practical experimentation or doing it in a different manner: planning new behavioural patterns and strategies and testing them in practice.

The supervisor's role is actually to guide workers in their learning cycle, through all four activities or phases of the learning process already described. He/she creates such learning situations which encourage workers to transit from one phase to another. Therefore, the supervision meetings should take place parallel to work, so that the learning process proceeds in the form of a spiral always reaching higher levels. Professional workers do their job, at the supervision meeting they reflect about what they have done and learn from it, then they return to their work and test what they have learned. The role of the supervisor is to offer them opportunities for safe experimenting and testing of new ways and behaviours. He/she protects them from getting into situations that would endanger them. That is why he/she discusses with them the possible solutions as well as their consequences. But which solution professional workers eventually decide upon and what they consequently learn from the supervised situation is their responsibility alone.

The role of the supervisor differs from the role of a mentor. A mentor is involved primarily in instructing, advising, monitoring, guiding and evaluating the students or young colleagues at the beginning of their professional career. Although these may be the functions of supervision too (Holloway, 1995), the main focus of a supervisor is on counselling, education and support of the professional. He/she provides the learning conditions and guides the supervisee through his/her own learning process. That is why the supervisor should be primarily an expert in supervision, while a mentor must be an expert in the same profession as the student he/she is mentoring. Mentoring is a way to enter the profession, while supervision is used by experienced professionals who want to improve the quality of their professional service. Kadushin (1976) stresses that through supervision, workers internalise sets of principles, attitudes and values that will partly govern their future behaviour. This enables them to act more autonomously and independently, because supervision provides supervisees 'with the sense of occupational identity' (p. 129).

According to the Statute of the Association of National Organizations for Supervision in Europe, supervisors must complete specific postgraduate education. They can come from different professions, because supervision covers different professional fields and schools. That means that supervisors are experts educated in supervision. They have specific theoretical and practical knowledge from the field of supervision and in their supervision work they use specific supervision methods (e.g. reflection). They are not necessarily experts in the field from which their supervisees are coming (even though that is highly recommended). The supervisors in the developmental-educational model of supervision in Slovenia are mostly psychologists, pedagogues, social workers and recently also some teachers. There are not enough educated supervisors available in Slovenia, which is why supervision is also run by professionals who have the knowledge and experiences in group-dynamic work or in psychotherapy. But they usually do not use the developmental-educational model of supervision; they use the methods they have learned in their psychotherapeutic education and/or developed in their work with groups.

Several studies have analysed the experiences and perceptions of the participants of the developmental-educational model of supervision in Slovenia (Bogataj, 1997; Dekleva, 1996; Dekleva & Rapuš Pavel, 1995; Kobolt, 1998; Žorga, 1997a; Žorga *et al.*, 2001). The results indicate that in the process of supervision, care workers, school and youth care counsellors, social workers, psychologists and other professionals from the field of social care, have the opportunity to reflect about their way of working and to analyse their feelings, reactions, attitudes and expectations on the basis of their concrete working situations. They receive support from their colleagues, exchange experiences and reflect about the problem from different perspectives. Through this they learn about themselves and their way of functioning, are able to perceive the situations from the point of view of the other, improve their communication and broaden their professional competence.

The described model relies on an active individual who, consistent with the developmental-contextual perspective, plays an important role in constructing knowledge and reality.

### **Learning and supervision**

The future learning society represents a personal challenge for all those who find that learning is a central life-long task essential for personal development and career success. Our work environment is changing faster than ever before. In order to exploit these changes successfully, we must become very skilled in learning, because only in this way can we respond to changes swiftly and correctly. The quality of services offered by a certain organisation depends, therefore, to a great extent on the education and development of its personnel. Hay (1995) believes future work organisations will need to become communities where people will be able to make use of all their competencies. And empowerment will become not only a desired but an indispensable strategy of every modern organisation.

The presupposition of the so-called 'learning organisation' is that everybody possesses an inner direction towards growth and development. Recognising learning and development as processes which take place throughout our lives requires social institutions and organisations to develop such functioning, which would enable adults to experience personal learning and development. Accordingly, many organisations have undertaken to improve on their climate. Kolb (1984) believes that these organisations can draw the necessary conceptual foundations and starting points, the leading philosophy, as well as practical educational tools from the experiential learning theory.

Everyday life situations offer many learning opportunities. Experts carrying out research on learning in adulthood have established that such learning is mostly based on life experience (and through this also on work experience) and is not acquired through formal education.

Mezirow defines learning as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, assessment and action (see Merriam & Clark, 1992, p. 3). Like Piaget, Mezirow also claims that several experiences from everyday life can easily be assimilated into our mental structure because they are congruent with experiences from earlier on. However, some life experiences are incongruent with past ones and cannot be properly interpreted with the existing mental structure only. Such experiences could be divorce, loss of job, a new position, the beginning of a new project, and many other unexpected situations one so frequently meets in innovative work. Experiences which cannot be readily assimilated challenge our existing mental structure towards restructuring and lead to new recognitions (Piaget, 1961) or to perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1990, see Merriam & Clark, 1992, p. 3).

Once the professional 'climax' has been attained, which, according to Fiske (1985), usually happens around the thirties or forties, it could be followed by long-lasting boredom at the work place, which can result in a feeling of stagnancy within the profession, accompanied by the burn-out syndrome. In this period it is, therefore, essential that the professional workers are able to process their work experiences, learn from them, and reintegrate what has been learned in the process of supervision.

Watkins (1995) points out that experiences alone do not ensure development, although we often assume that the more experienced we are, the more developed we become in the different areas of our performance. The key characteristic, distinguishing those who learn and grow from the rest to whom the same does not apply, is self-criticism. Self-criticism is to be understood as a constructive and evaluational stance of the individual, who regularly takes time to reflect on what he/she is doing and permanently educates him/herself professionally. In short, this is a professional or a supervisor who actively and aggressively works on improving his/her professional skills and understanding. Only experiences combined with such self-criticism can bring about development.

In this connection, Megginson & Whitaker (1996) have introduced the concept of self-development, an approach that emphasises the importance of life-long learning. Such an approach takes into account our great learning potentials and the potentials for changing what we are doing.

The authors believe that self-development has become such a popular and successful approach because it helps people to adapt to new life challenges in organisations and to enjoy them. It focuses on the cyclical experiential learning process as understood by Kolb (do something, think about it, make sense of it, do it differently), and fosters the development of the ability to take responsibility and to do the kind of work directed towards action, i.e. towards giving encouragement and not only towards reacting to challenges (Megginson & Whitaker, 1996). Supervision is certainly to be understood as one of those methods of self-development which can successfully contribute to continuing learning and to the development of professional workers.

### **Experiential learning and development in supervision**

Experiential learning is one of the crucial concepts of the developmental-educational model of supervision. Supervision can be understood as an example of learning, as a dialectical process in which working experiences and theoretical concepts integrate or as a dialectical process of assimilation of working experiences.

Kolb (1984) considers Dewey, Lewin and Piaget as the most important intellectual forefathers of experiential learning theory. He points to the striking similarity between the learning process model developed by Dewey and the one developed by Lewin; they both emphasise learning as a dialectical process integrating experience and concepts.

An equally important contribution to the understanding of experiential learning represents Piaget's description of the cognitive process as a dialectical process of assimilation of experiences. Piaget (1970, see Kolb, 1984, p. 23) sees the dimension of experience and learning, reflection and action as the basic continuum in the development of adult thinking. The development from infancy to adulthood moves from a concrete, phenomenological view of the world towards an abstract, constructivist view and from an active and ego-centred view towards a reflective and internalised behaviour pattern. Piaget points to the fact that these two dimensions used to represent the basic directions of knowledge development in science. The learning process, within which this development takes place, represents an interaction cycle between the individual and his/her environment, which bears similarity to the learning models of Dewey (1955) and Lewin (1951). Using Piaget's terminology we could, therefore, say that in learning, mutual interaction takes place between the process of accommodating concepts or schemes to the experiences in the world and the process of assimilating events and experiences of the world into the existing thought concept and schemes. The consequence of balanced tension between the described processes is intellectual adaptation or learning. The process of cognitive growth from concrete to abstract and from an active to reflective dimension is thus based on constant interaction between accommodation and assimilation taking place each time at a higher level. The levels follow one another in such a manner that each incorporates what has happened at the previous level into a new cognitive functioning at a higher level.

Also, in professional supervision the integration process where new experience and theoretical knowledge combine with the existing thinking schemes can well be explained with Piaget's (1961) process of equilibration. When we are faced with a behaviour or emotional response that cannot be explained on the basis of already acquired experience and knowledge (be it our emotional response and behaviour or that of our client, colleague, boss), we feel confused, helpless and incompetent. In this case Piaget speaks about a destroyed balance or disequilibrium. Facing one's own and/or other behaviour and/or emotional response, in a way unexplainable to us and therefore unacceptable, a state of conflict or imbalance is reached at the level of our thinking activity. Our organism is namely faced with information which is not in accordance with the existing thinking schemes. Reflecting on this behaviour or emotional response, searching for factors influencing it, grounds connected with it and new patterns possible in a similar situation, make possible the adaptation of some elements of experience to the existing thinking schemes (assimilation). At the same time the transformation of existing attitudes, implicit theories and behavioural patterns influenced by this experience takes place (accommodation). The result of these two processes is the acquisition of new knowledge, new skills, new experience and behavioural patterns and consequently the undertaking of action at a qualitatively different, higher level. Such a process of balancing existing attitudes, knowledge and behavioural patterns with new experiences and newly acquired knowledge can be called the process of equilibration.

The professional worker is in permanent interaction with his/her environment. By destroying his/her equilibrium, new experiences stimulate the process of equilibration (and through this the development) of a professional again and again. The higher the stages of understanding the professional worker is approaching, the broader and more complex are his/her thinking patterns and the more integrated are his/her thinking structures. The more intensive the professional's interaction with his/her environment, the more frequent are impulses for the development of these structures. Piaget understands cognitive development as a continuous process in the form of a spiral. In this context the process of equilibration is a force of motion or a motive power for the professional's adaptation to his/her environment (Labinowitz, 1989).

Kolb (1984) believes that Piaget's cognitive theory of development indicates the main



developmental processes which constitute the basic learning process in adulthood. To Piaget the two dimensions (concrete–abstract, active–reflective) represent a developmental continuum where phenomenality and ego-centredness are lower forms than constructivism and reflection, whereas Kolb sees that '(...) the poles of these dimensions are equipotent modes of knowing that through dialectic transformations result in learning. This learning proceeds along a third, developmental dimension that represents not the dominance of one learning mode over another but the integration of the four adaptive modes' (p. 40). Dewey has already pointed out that the experiential learning cycle is not a circle but rather a spiral, with each experience including a new potential for movement (Dewey, 1955, p. 132). Therefore, learning is a process where development takes place.

The described process of cognitive development is actually identical to what is described as taking place in the process of supervision. We start with the concrete experience and then proceed with its reflection, its abstract conceptualisation and experimentation which leads us to the new experience, reflection, etc. The experiential learning theory of development is directed towards the exchange between inner characteristics and outer circumstances, between the personal and the social knowledge. It is the process of learning from experience that shapes and realises development. This learning is a social process where the development of the individual depends on the cultural system of social knowledge.

With the help of his concept of 'zone of proximal development', Vygotsky (1977) elaborates on how learning influences the course of development. He emphasises the inner developmental potentials as being realised through the experience of imitation and in communication with others and through the interaction of the individual with his physical environment, and are then practised until they become internalised as an independent developmental achievement. Through the mutual functioning of individuals with their biological potentials and the society with its symbols, tools and other cultural goods, learning can become the driving force of human development. Therefore, changing cultural tools also necessitates a change in the course of human development. By creating culture and all its artificial products, people accelerate their own development. Supervision can be seen as such a cultural product, which enables the acceleration and promotion of one's professional and personal development in adulthood.

Vygotsky (1977) defines the zone of proximal development as the distance between the actual and the potential development. The potential level of development is evident in the tasks and mental problems the individual can solve in co-operation with more experienced partners or more experienced social others. In supervision, the professional worker usually learns with the help of a more experienced, or in certain domains (supervision) better educated, colleague. By adapting Miltenburg & Singer's (1999) application of Vygotsky's views from the therapeutic to the supervision situation we can say that the supervisor can create a zone of proximal development by:

- interpreting the supervision situation as a joint problem solving setting, where both the worker and the supervisor pursue a common goal;
- the supervisor should make clear by his/her attitude that he/she believes in the plasticity of the professional worker;
- the supervisor should introduce psychological tools (e.g. reflection) to assist the worker's mastery of intrapsychological processes.

The way learning shapes the course of development can also be described by four learning modes: effective, perceptual, symbolic and behavioural complexities, which are linked together in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). Effective complexity in concrete experience results in higher-order sentiments, perceptual complexity in reflective observation results in higher-order observations, symbolic complexity in abstract conceptualisation results in

higher-order concepts, and behavioural complexity in active experimentation results in higher-order actions, states Kolb.

Kolb explains the experiential learning model of development with the help of a cone, with the lower levels of development forming its base and the top point as their climax, which indicates increased integration of the mentioned four activities at the higher levels. Such a process of progression is characterised by an increasing composite structure and relativity in managing the world and one's own experiences as well as by the integration of the four fundamental learning modes at a higher level. At the lower levels of development, progression can take place at any of the mentioned four dimensions relatively independently of the rest, while at the higher levels of development the individual's dedication to learning and creativity requires integration of all four adaptation modes.

In his experiential learning theory of development, Kolb (1984) differentiates between three broad developmental stages of the developmental process: acquisition, specialisation and integration. The first stage lasts approximately from birth to adolescence and is marked by the acquisition of basic learning competencies and cognitive structures. Gradually, internalised structures are formed which enable the child to establish the sense of oneself as a separate entity, differing from the environment around it.

The next stage, which is characterised by specialisation, covers the period of formal education and training for a profession as well as early work and life experiences of adulthood. During this period, the individual is faced with choices, which bear a pregnant influence on the course of his/her further development. Interaction between choices and socialisational experiences results in an increased emphasis on specific personal characteristics and skills, which empower the individual to execute professional tasks more successfully. During the developmental period of specialisation, the individual acquires the ability to manage the requirements of the professional career he/she has chosen and with it the feeling of individuality.

Professional supervision can help the individual to be even more successful at his/her work, but during the process of permanent reflection of his/her actions, thoughts and feelings it also makes him/her more aware of his/her weaknesses and needs. Specialisation, which is the developmental achievement at the second level, results in social assertion and security, frequently at the cost of the submission of the needs for personal fulfilment, stresses Kolb. The time of youth is thus spent in the search of one's identity, which is in the service of society. In the endeavours to attain a well-rounded whole, we finally recognise that the consciousness uniting us is not gratifying at all. Concerning Kolb, fulfilment, or as called by Jung, individuation, can only be completed through the expression of an individual's non-dominant forms of managing the world (those parts that have not been developed during the period of specialisation), and by integrating his/her non-dominant and specialised forms at a higher level.

Kolb (1984) claims that for a long time the needs of the specialised Western society have been in conflict with individuals and their aspiration towards integrative development. In his opinion, the transition from the second to the third level of development is marked by the individual's personal and existential confrontation with this conflict. The personal experience of the conflict between the demands of the society and the needs of the individual for personal fulfilment and connected with it the recognition of oneself as an object, accelerate the individual's transition to the integrative level of development. This experience can develop in the form of a gradual awakening process, parallel to the process of specialisation, or it appears suddenly, as a consequence of a life crisis (for example, loss of a job or a divorce). Kolb points out that some people never reach this experience because they have sunk too deeply into the societal reward system which encourages the performance of differentiated and specialised functions.

The challenges of integrative development are enormous and not every individual is capable of facing them, regardless of how high his/her intelligence and professional training might be. I believe that with its manner of handling problems, reflecting on the professional's actions and decisions, with the constant examination and elucidation of situations from various angles, supervision can effectively accelerate the development of a professional in the direction of facing the mentioned conflict and consequently towards the development of a more integrated personality.

This can be observed in the results of an analysis of evaluation reports written by school counsellors, youth care workers and teachers in higher education after having been involved for 2 or 3 years in the supervision process. The analysis (Žorga, 1997a) showed that the experiences and knowledge gained in the course of the supervision process were reflected in their professional as well as private lives. Many professional workers claimed that the most important results of the supervision work pertained to the growth and development of their personality. They reported that the supervision meetings had helped them to reach deeper insights into their way of thinking, decision making and performance. They became more self-confident, the level of their self-respect was raised and they began to look for their own answers to questions instead of looking for them via their supervisors. They became increasingly aware of their strengths and weaknesses, which enabled them to exploit and control them more consciously. Some of them reported how they had learned to recognise and listen to their feelings better. By being able to express their feelings and thoughts more clearly and adequately they improved their communication skills. They also began to look after their health and well-being with greater care and pay more attention to the balance between what they were allowed to do and what they desired. They learned to take for themselves what they need more frequently.

This new awareness allows a person to experience a change in the frame of reference through which he/she used to experience life, evaluate activities and make decisions. In Kolb's (1984) opinion, the nature of this change depends on the peculiarities in the individual's dominant and non-dominant (unexpressed) forms of adaptation. Thus, the awakening of an active form of adaptation empowers a reflective person with a new feeling for risk taking. Rather than be influenced, the person wants to influence others. Instead of observing and accepting experiences as they happen, it becomes a challenge to form one's own experiences. On the other hand, for the person who has specialised in the active adaptation mode, development of the opposite reflective side can widen the possibility of choice and deepen the ability to feel the results of action.

In Kolb's (1984) opinion, the pure effect of these changes lies in the increased feeling of oneself during the process. The learning process originally blocked by non-specialised adaptation forms is now experienced by the individual as a deep essence of oneself.

As in developmental psychology, researchers of supervision (Kadushin, 1976; Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987; Stoltenberg *et al.*, 1998; Watkins, 1990) also established different numbers of stages which the supervisee passes in the process of development, and which they each describe in his/her own way. They discovered that the results depend on the supervisor's style of work, his/her theoretical background and methodological approach, as well as on the societal, social and even geographical environment in which the supervision takes place. The learning environment provided in supervision will interact with the level of development of the professional worker, resulting in change. According to Kadushin (1976), progress proceeds from the development of a supervisee's professional skills through the conceptualisation of their work towards increased self-awareness, where they are able to study their personal qualities and how these influence their professional actions.

## Conclusion

In this paper some concepts that explain in different ways learning and acquiring competence in the process of supervision have been discussed. There are those which can explain it through the process of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) or learning within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1977) and others that talk about the process of mental adaptation leading to new cognition (Piaget, 1961) or to perspective transformation (Mezirow, see Merriam & Clark, 1992). And yet, is it not learning that takes place in all of them? Although we know that systematic change is not limitless, contemporary theories stress that the relative plasticity and potential for change exist across the life span (Baltes *et al.*, 1998, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, 1988, 1998). By knowing it, we can design policies and programmes promoting positive development (Lerner, 1998). My firm belief is that the implementation of the developmental-educational model of supervision in the field of social care and education could be one such programme for promoting positive life-long professional and personal competence, learning and development.

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