This is the published version of a paper presented at The 10th International Scientific Conference. Research in Education and Rehabilitation Sciences – ERFCON2023, Zagreb, Croatia, 20230505-20230507.

Citation for the original published paper:

Basic, G. (2024) Ethical issues in doctoral supervision: An analysis of inherent conflicts and roles in supervision practice In: The 10th International Scientific Conference. Research in Education and Rehabilitation Sciences – ERFCON2023. Zagreb, Croatia, 20230505-20230507. (pp. 82-92). University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences Scientific Series

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-120609
Ethical issues in doctoral supervision: an analysis of inherent conflicts and roles in supervision practice

SUMMARY

This study aimed to provide new knowledge about ethical issues in doctoral supervision by analysing conflicts and roles that are assumed and acted out in supervision practice. This analysis was based on a literature review of various studies from the field of educational sciences, social pedagogy, doctoral supervision in theory and practice, and theories and practice of teaching and learning. The literature review identified several ethical issues relevant to doctoral supervision. These issues mostly arose from disappointed expectations, for instance, in the supervisor’s or doctoral student’s knowledge/competence, cultural viewpoint, roles, participation, language proficiency, and criticism/feedback. This analysis found that conflicts and the roles adopted and acted out during a supervision situation were not static – multiple roles could be assumed simultaneously, and the roles changed frequently. These changes provided opportunities to prevent or remedy ethical issues and conflicts in supervision. Changes could also lead to the creation and replication of a stable relationship between the doctoral student and the supervisor. To prevent ethical issues and conflicts, the relationship between a doctoral student and a supervisor should be characterised by mutual respect, responsibility, integrity, and recognition. These components are necessary to: (1) create the conditions for successful knowledge development in supervision, (2) complete a third-cycle education programme, (3) qualify the doctoral student to hold a doctoral degree, and (4) prevent ethical issues and conflicts connected with doctoral student supervision, through the constructive alignment of various elements in the third-cycle programme.

Key words: higher education teaching, social pedagogical practice, supervisor role, doctoral student role, social meaning, pedagogical meaning, social pedagogical order, social pedagogical disorder

Introduction

The purpose of this article was to gain new knowledge about ethical issues in doctoral supervision by analysing the conflicts and the roles assumed and acted out in supervision practice1.

1Some parts of this text were previously published in English, in the scientific articles, “Ethical issues in doctoral supervision: An analysis of inherent conflicts and roles in supervision practice” (Basic, 2023).
The approach was to review and analyse relevant research in the following fields within the educational sciences: *Doctoral Supervision in Theory and Practice* (Lindén 2005; Emilsson & Johnsson 2007; Lee 2008, 2012; McCallin & Nayar 2012; Lindén et al. 2013; Brodin et al. 2020), *Theories and Practice of Teaching and Learning* (Fox 1983; Kolb 1984; Kugel 1993; Biggs & Tang 2011; Svinicki & McKeachie 2011; Bradbury 2019), and *Social Pedagogy* (Eriksson & Winman 2010; Hämalläinen 2012; Úcar 2013; Eriksson 2014; Kornbeck & Úcar 2015; Hämalläinen & Eriksson 2016; Basic & Matsuda 2020; Janer & Úcar 2019, 2020; Úcar et al. 2020; Basic et al. 2021; Greve et al. 2021; Kesak & Basic 2023). The present study was focused on the actions of the actors (supervisor and doctoral student) in the supervision situation and their influence on each other in the interactive flow, before, during, and after the supervision situation.

The literature reviewed from the educational sciences (*Doctoral Supervision in Theory and Practice*) highlighted the fact that relationship-building between the doctoral student and supervisor was important in achieving a successful outcome through supervision. The literature also highlighted the importance of creating and maintaining a balance in the doctoral student-supervisor relationship. Furthermore, the literature suggested that deviations from this balance might give rise to conflicts and other issues in the supervisor-doctoral student relationship. Both too much distance and too much familiarity in the interactive flow between the doctoral student and the supervisor can lead to issues and role confusion in the expectations each party imposes on the other, before, during, and after the supervision situation (Lindén 2005; Emilsson & Johnsson 2007; Lee 2008, 2012; McCallin & Nayar 2012; Lindén et al. 2013; Brodin et al. 2020).

Based on the literature reviewed from the educational sciences in the field of *Theories and Practice of Teaching and Learning*, various theoretical models for teaching and learning processes were available. These models provided insight into the different roles that the teacher (supervisor) and student (doctoral student) could assume and act out. The literature showed that teaching and learning are not distinct from other social interactions. The components of teaching and learning include the teacher’s role, the supervisor’s role, the student’s role, the doctoral student’s role, the negotiated norms, the morals, the prevailing structure in the teaching situation, and the teachers’/supervisors’ and students'/doctoral students' approaches to explaining and assigning meaning to different teaching situations. The common feature in these components is that they are all manifested and played out in a myriad of everyday interactions, both within and outside the context of the teaching situation (Fox 1983; Kolb 1984; Kugel 1993; Biggs & Tang 2011; Svinicki & McKeachie 2011; Bradbury 2019). In the framework of the present study, the supervision of doctoral students was analysed as a teaching situation linked to a number of ethical issues. These issues are acted upon, they unfold in supervision situations, and they constitute interpersonal interactions between doctoral students and their supervisors. These interactions contribute to the construction and reconstruction of different supervisor and doctoral student roles, which are played out in the relationship. In turn, these roles affect the dynamics of the situation and the future actions and perceptions of the actors involved.
Based on the literature, one of the roles a teacher/supervisor can assume and act out is the role of conveyor. A knowledge conveyer depicts knowledge as an object that is transferred from one place to another; that is, from the teacher (supervisor) to the student (doctoral student). When the supervisor adopts the role of a conveyor of knowledge, the doctoral student may view the supervisor as unaware that the supervision situation lacks the appropriate context for deploying the knowledge imparted. In those situations, a supervisor might attempt to create a context during supervision that allows the doctoral student to participate actively.

Another role that a teacher (supervisor) can assume and act out is the role of modeller. A knowledge modeller treats knowledge as a static phenomenon that cannot be changed or developed; thus, to the modeller, teaching (supervision) is a process where the student (doctoral student) is shaped according to a predetermined pattern. When a supervisor adopts the role of modeller, the doctoral student may perceive the supervisor as acting through predetermined patterns or routines that the supervisor is reluctant to change (Fox 1983; Kolb 1984; Kugel 1993; Biggs & Tang 2011; Svinicki & McKeachie 2011; Bradbury 2019). Taking on the roles of conveyor and modeller can lead to role confusion for the doctoral student, who has developed and continues to develop knowledge in critical thinking through the university and through research generated at the university. Consequently, adopting the conveyor and modeller roles can lead to a number of conflicts in the supervision relationship. Some of these conflicts are highlighted and analysed in the present study.

Another role that a teacher (supervisor) can assume and act out is the role of tour guide. When a supervisor acts as a tour guide, knowledge production is treated as a process of exchange between the supervisor and the doctoral student; in this role, the supervisor helps the doctoral student navigate through difficulties and stimulates the doctoral student’s participation and knowledge development. The doctoral student is expected to participate actively in knowledge production in collaboration with the supervisor. Thus, the supervision is focused on the interactive process between the two parties (the supervisor and the doctoral student), who jointly undertake the process of developing the knowledge needed for goal fulfilment in the student’s third-cycle programme (Fox 1983; Kolb 1984; Kugel 1993; Biggs & Tang 2011; Svinicki & McKeachie 2011; Bradbury 2019).

The analytical basis that helps create the conditions for knowledge development in supervision does not differ from the analytical basis applied to other teaching situations, where participating actors are expected to learn, formulate, develop, change (for the better through knowledge development), and socialise. In the teaching situation, the conditions for knowledge development are created through: (1) beneficial social interactions, (2) positive encounters, (3) good relationships, (4) good fellowship, and (5) changes for the better. These activities comprise a form of interactively anchored recognition of the actors in the educational situation, in both the social and pedagogical senses.
Social pedagogical perspective

The social pedagogical perspective is based on theoretical and methodological reasoning, which argues that society is not governed exclusively from the top down. Furthermore, this perspective assumes that normality, in the teaching situation, and fellowship are not characterised by a clear structure or order, in either the social or the pedagogical sense. Social pedagogical order – or social pedagogical disorder – does not arise solely from normative guidelines in teaching situations that are related to the university’s and school’s (department) written and unwritten rules, routines, norms, values, and curricula. Instead, both social pedagogical order and social pedagogical disorder are produced and reproduced through interpersonal interactions, constitutive rules, meaning-making, conflicts, control, and monitoring. In addition, both social pedagogical order and disorder are influenced by the actors’ practical actions in different teaching situations (Eriksson & Winman 2010; Hämäläinen 2012; Úcar 2013; Eriksson 2014; Kornbeck & Úcar 2015; Hämäläinen & Eriksson 2016; Basic & Matsuda 2020; Janer & Úcar 2019, 2020; Úcar et al. 2020; Basic et al. 2021; Greve et al. 2021; Kesak & Basic 2023). When a supervisor is assigned to a doctoral student, the interactions between the two involve the production and reproduction of the social pedagogical order – and disorder – in teaching situations. Indeed, these phenomena appear to be created and recreated continuously in supervision situations, where a series of interactions and events play out that are observable and describable, reproduced, retold, and presented in a range of interpersonal interactions, both during the supervision situation and after it has played out.

The central point of the social pedagogical perspective is that it requires an analytical curiosity about the other, including the other’s interpretation of both social and pedagogical phenomena; the other’s actions, based on the interpretation; and the other’s interests, which are actualised in connection with those actions. This central point is about acquiring an awareness and turning the analytical focus towards: (1) the different social identities of the actors involved (e.g., ethnicity, gender identity, victimhood, class); the different pedagogical identities (e.g., student, pupil, doctoral student, teacher, supervisor, professor, successful pupil/student/doctoral student/teacher/supervisor/professor, or devalued pupil/student/doctoral student/teacher/supervisor/professor), which are acted out in situations and created and recreated (or constructed and reconstructed); and the interpersonal interactions involved (including written and oral descriptions and narratives); (2) the social and pedagogical codes, social and pedagogical control, social and pedagogical preconceptions, social and pedagogical monitoring, social and pedagogical devaluation of actors, and the sacrifices that are produced and reproduced in interpersonal interactions within social pedagogical practice; (3) variations in the perceptions, descriptions, narratives, and representations of the social and pedagogical aspects of learning, teaching, and nurturing; and (4) the representations, constructions, reconstructions, productions, and reproductions of learning, teaching, and nurturing in the so-

The analytical concepts discussed in social pedagogical publications (e.g., an inclusive educational space/context, social pedagogical recognition, spatial dynamics in schools and universities, social pedagogical development, and educational collaboration) are relevant to university practices; first, with respect to the systematic quality of work carried out, or expected to be carried out, at the university level; and, second, with respect to the scientific analyses (research) that are conducted within the framework of research and development projects. The present study takes the analytical position that the inclusive teaching situation and social pedagogical recognition in the teaching situation (i.e., social pedagogical recognition of both the doctoral student and the supervisor) are two of the most important analytical aspects of the teaching situation that contribute to achieving the learning objectives (or other markers of success in the practical work on the third-cycle level) in subsequent steps. These precepts (i.e., inclusion and recognition) must be achieved in the supervision situation as a prerequisite for the other goals that the supervisor aims to achieve across different educational collaborations and in different educational situations in the third-cycle programme. If the analytical basis discussed in the social pedagogical literature and applied in the present analysis is not achieved in the teaching situation, then, the systematic quality work, employee competence development, and different higher education programmes that are carried out, or are expected to be carried out, at universities will be less likely to make an impact. Moreover, supervisors will be less likely to make an impact in the supervision of doctoral students, which is an essential component of third-cycle education programmes.

A number of social and pedagogical phenomena related to ethical issues in the supervision of doctoral students remain unknown and should be investigated further. The present article describes a detailed investigation of some of these phenomena through a detailed analysis that centred around the following three questions: What ethical issues are apparent in the literature in connection with the supervision of doctoral students? How are supervision conflicts and the different roles adopted, or expected to be adopted in connection with supervision, related to the emergence of these ethical issues? How can these ethical issues be prevented?

Through the analysis, this study aimed to contribute to the development of knowledge, regarding: (1) the analytical management of ethics, supervision, conflict, and roles in supervision interactions; (2) social pedagogical recognition and lack of recognition of doctoral and supervisor identities at the university level; (3) identity creation and re-creation among doctoral students and supervisors in relation to ethics, supervision, conflict, and roles in supervision interactions; and (4) alternative approaches to analysis, compared to the standard legal perspectives.
**Methodological Starting Points**

This narrative (or traditional) literature review is based on a qualitative method (Silverman 2015, 2006; Machi & Brenda 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Frels 2016; Basic et al. 2021: 4). The empirical studies and empirical sequences in these studies that are reanalyzed in the present analysis, are of a secondary nature (Wästerfors et al. 2013; Björk et al. 2019; Johnsson et al. 2021). The choice of the relevant empirical studies and the primary analysis of the empirical data in these studies were performed in relation with prior analyses (Fox 1983; Kolb 1984; Kugel 1993; Lindén 2005; Emilsson & Johnsson 2007; Lee 2008, 2012; Biggs & Tang 2011; Svinicki & McKeachie 2011; McCallin & Nayar 2012; Lindén et al. 2013; Bradbury 2019; Brodin et al. 2020).

Table 1 *The corpus of studies that were reviewed and analysed in this literature review*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical starting points for re-analysis</th>
<th>Reviewed: doctoral supervision in theory and practice</th>
<th>Reviewed: theories and practice of teaching and learning</th>
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</table>

Based on the purpose of the study, re-analysis is performed in the present literature study and the research question by re-analyzing the selected studies with the help of 1) interactionist, constructionist and ethnomethodological scientific theoretical starting points (Larochelle et al. 1998; Taber 2011; Farr et al. 2019; Krompák et al. 2021), (2) research particularly related to the concepts of “social pedagogical recognition” and “educational collaboration” and the over-all perspective from social pedagogical work (Eriksson & Winman 2010; Hämäläinen 2012; Úcar 2013; Eriksson 2014; Kornbeck & Úcar 2015; Hämäläinen & Eriksson 2016; Basic & Matsuda 2020; Janer & Úcar 2019, 2020; Úcar et al. 2020; Basic et al. 2021; Greve et al. 2021; Kesak & Basic 2023).
In the spirit of interactionism, constructivism, and the ethnomethodological approach, this narrative (or traditional) literature review analyses how doctoral students and supervisors themselves (in the analyzed literature) use identity-related and cultural resources (e.g., narratives, metaphors, vocabulary, roles, educational status symbols, Basic et al. 2021: 4-5) in the day-to-day interaction in the educational collaboration, such as when they talk about advantages in the educational interaction, describe working conditions, formulate criticism, and process their experiences. The fact that certain actors/types command an advantage in relation to others is important in the analysis of the present study in two ways: first, in the representation of relationships between doctoral students and supervisors (here, in the literature regarding social pedagogical recognition and educational collaboration in educational space/context), and second, in the representation of the relationships of these doctoral students and supervisors to the spatial dynamics in the organisational and practical work of universities. For this study, therefore, the representation of working with doctoral students is analysed less in terms of static typifications and more in terms of situational and space-bound (institutionally and materially positioned) interactions described in the analysed literature.

**Discussion**

The present study aimed to gain new knowledge about ethical issues that arise in doctoral supervision through analysis of the conflicts and roles that are assumed and acted out in supervision practice.

In a postgraduate context, social pedagogical control and social pedagogical monitoring (related to curriculum, written and unwritten rules, schedules, tests, research and development work, and various practical teaching and research situations) contribute to the production and reproduction of different roles for doctoral students and supervisors. The social pedagogy defines who they are and who they are expected to be, what they know and are expected to know, what they believe and are expected to believe, and what they learn and are expected to learn. All these roles are played out according to the unique social pedagogical normative order in the university, which is an important pillar of the doctoral student and supervisor identities. These identities are created and re-created during social and pedagogical activities.

Furthermore, the social pedagogical control and monitoring that occurs outside of the university is also important for the production and reproduction of different roles for the doctoral student and the supervisor. Interpersonal interactions related to family, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, control, monitoring, etc., contribute to the creation and re-creation of roles related to the expectations imposed on doctoral students and supervisors in a university setting and in society in general.
This analysis showed that the relationship between a doctoral student and a supervisor demanded stability and should be characterised by mutual respect, responsibility, integrity, and social pedagogical recognition. Within the framework of the present study, this type of relationship stability was required to: (1) create the conditions for successful knowledge development in supervision, (2) complete the postgraduate programme, and (3) achieve the learning objectives that lead to a doctoral degree. The remaining question is what can be done in postgraduate education practices within a university to achieve a stable, mutually beneficial relationship, which has the capacity to prevent the emergence of ethical issues and conflicts in connection with the supervision of doctoral students? One potential answer that became evident in the literature relates to the concept of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang 2011).

The concept of constructive alignment is based on the analytical argument that all teaching activities (including supervising doctoral students) that are carried out through interactions with students (or doctoral students) should be coherent. Thus, the different components of teaching should be connected to form a cohesive whole. In practice, the supervisor should, first, maintain a common thread when planning and formulating learning objectives, goals, and expected learning outcomes for a doctoral student. These goals and outcomes should be related to the scientifically based research or development work that the doctoral student will undertake and to the postgraduate education programme as a whole. Second, this common thread should run through the subject content that the supervisor teaches and through the working methods and supervisory activities that the supervisor chooses to use. Third, this common thread should shape the approach the supervisor takes in supervising the doctoral student. Fourth, this common thread should shape the way the supervisor evaluates his/her supervision, and it should shape the doctoral student’s postgraduate education as a whole. It is essential that all four of these elements are included in the scientifically based research or development work that the doctoral student carries out and in the postgraduate education programme to which the doctoral student is admitted.

These four items may sound redundant at first; some doctoral supervisors may argue that their supervision activities are already shaped and implemented in accordance with the principles of constructive coordination. However, the literature has suggested that constructive coordination has declined in some supervision assignments. Indeed, this decline has been observed in the author’s own experiences in research, development work in the internship, and courses in higher education pedagogy. Moreover, the doctoral student’s subordinate position in the relationship with the supervisor has contributed to creating and recreating a culture of silence at the university in relation to “research supervision”.

Ultimately, it is the supervisor’s responsibility to make changes and improvements to the supervision process and to prevent ethical issues and conflicts from arising in connection
with the supervision. An interesting question that was raised during our work on this study was whether and how doctoral students and supervisors take note of the importance of leadership in the social pedagogical work with doctoral students at the university. Another important question is how narrative leadership is handled at the university in the supervisors’ social pedagogical work and in the doctoral students’ reproduction of supervision situations, in relation to the following issues: How can equivalent education for doctoral students be organisationally ensured? How can the quality of education (supervision of doctoral students included) be ensured for doctoral students? What teaching materials are suitable in a supervision situation? How can supervisor competencies be developed? How can universities create the conditions for successful collaborations between supervisors and doctoral students?
References


