PEDAGOGICAL SUPERVISION TO PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING AND THE QUALITY OF SERVICES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes pedagogical supervision as an essential meta-reflective tool for addressing the complexity of socio-educational contexts and the heavy emotional burden on professionals. Despite regulatory consolidation under Law 55/2024 and inclusion in the Essential Levels of Social Services (LEPS), the practice of supervision in Italy still appears fragmented. The text integrates two research tracks: a quantitative survey of 320 professionals, which demonstrates how supervision enhances personal resources by acting as a protective factor against burnout, and an action research study in home-based education aimed at countering professional isolation. In an era marked by the integration of artificial intelligence, supervision emerges as a necessary infrastructure to bridge the "AI empathy gap," providing a space for emotional literacy indispensable to preserving the educational relationship.

KEYWORDS
educational supervision; professional well-being; domiciliary education; social-emotional skills; artificial intelligence.

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1. Introduction

Socio-educational contexts are highly complex and dynamic environments in which education professionals face unique operational challenges daily and cope with a particularly heavy emotional burden (Femminini et al., 2024; Salerni & Szpunar, 2019). In this context, educational practice requires not only a solid theoretical foundation but also a constant, reflective, and critical approach to professional practice, which is necessary not only to ensure service quality but also to prevent work-related stress and burnout (Femminini & Stanzione, 2025; Stanzione, 2023). The scientific literature and relevant legislation (Law 55, 2024; Law 234, 2021) identify pedagogical supervision as the tool par excellence for supporting this process, defining it as a meta-reflective practice of analyzing and redesigning educational actions (Oggionni, 2013). It takes the form of 'meta-work' or 'work on work', aimed at ensuring the right distance from events and fostering the connection between theory and practice (MLPS, 2021; Olivieri, 2024).

In recent years, the Italian landscape has seen significant regulatory developments aimed at stabilizing this system. A decisive impetus came from the 2021–2023 National Plan for Social Interventions and Services, which included professional supervision among the Essential Levels of Social Services (LEPS), recognizing its strategic role in improving service quality and safeguarding practitioners' well-being (MLPS, 2021). This process of legitimization is also linked to Law No. 55 of 15 April 2024, which formalized the regulatory framework for pedagogical and educational professions, assigning pedagogists key roles in coordination, consultancy, and, specifically, pedagogical supervision (Law 55/2024). This recognition aims to overcome the sector's long-standing structural fragility, offering a concrete response to the need to consolidate professional identity and prevent the isolation of practitioners (Cardinali, 2019; Femminini & Stanzione, 2025).

Despite its central importance in theory and legislation, the uptake of supervision amongst education professionals still appears fragmented, in contrast to its widespread adoption amongst other professional groups, such as social workers. Often perceived as an additional burden or an occasional task (Morsanuto & Cardinali, 2020), it is also hampered by a lack of systematic empirical studies confirming its impact in educational contexts (Carpenter et al., 2013; Femminini et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for research that examines not only the formal existence of the scheme, but above all the quality as perceived by practitioners, starting with the regularity

of meetings – factors that are crucial to the effectiveness of the intervention (Carpenter et al., 2012).

Furthermore, and by no means of secondary importance, is the issue of the centrality of human relationships in an era marked by the growing integration of artificial intelligence even into human spheres. The issue of pedagogical supervision takes on even greater significance, since, although AI is capable of supporting technical and organizational functions to the extent of generating forms of simulated affectivity through the recognition of emotional patterns, it cannot in any way replace the beating heart of the educational relationship (Strollo & Buccini, 2025).

According to the cognitive-evaluative theory of emotions, these are not merely automatic reactions, but complex value judgments rooted in vulnerability, beliefs, and the pursuit of personal well-being (Salerno, 2021).

Educational practice requires a human presence capable of exercising intentionality, ethical discernment, and relational responsibility – dimensions that remain beyond the reach of digital technologies. Precisely because of what research terms the "AI empathy gap" — that is, the inability of machines to genuinely experience emotions or form authentic bonds — pedagogical supervision emerges as an essential space for emotional literacy (Kurian, 2025).

In this sense, the mechanism of supervision is not merely a methodological tool but an infrastructure for cultivating humanity, enabling professionals to process emotional strain and make sense of crises in ways that no algorithmic simulation can replicate.

This paper addresses a gap in the literature on empirical studies of this topic and adopts an ethical, deontological, and epistemological stance regarding the fundamental necessity of professional supervision and human relationships. Two complementary research pathways are presented here: the first study, of a quantitative nature, involved a sample of 320 education professionals to analyze the prevalence of supervision and its impact on well-being, work engagement, and socio-emotional skills. The second study focuses on the specific context of domiciliary education, a field characterized by a high degree of professional isolation (Salerni, 2020). Through a project involving needs analysis and the trialing of a supervision model, the aim is to investigate how this tool can support educators who, whilst working in isolation, must think as part of a team, transforming emotional challenges into opportunities for transformative learning (Madriz, 2021). The integration of these studies provides an empirical basis for guiding training approaches and consolidating supervision as a structured professional right and duty (Femminini, et al., in press).

2. Theoretical framework: pedagogical supervision as a meta-reflective and transformative tool

The academic literature defines pedagogical supervision as a meta-reflective practice that involves the analysis and re-evaluation of educational actions, with a focus on intentionality and planning (Oggionni, 2013). It takes the form of 'meta-work' or 'work on work', aimed at setting aside day-to-day operations to analyze work processes and to foster a critical understanding of them (Oggionni, 2013; Oggionni and Palmieri, 2019; Olivieri, 2024). Unlike psychological supervision, which focuses on intrapsychic or therapeutic experiences, or pedagogical counseling, which is geared towards pragmatic problem-solving objectives, pedagogical supervision pursues educational and developmental aims, encouraging the search for meaning in actions within a planning framework (Cardinali, 2019; Cavicchioli, 2007).

According to a recent systematic review of the literature, the practice of supervision revolves around six fundamental dimensions: transformative learning from experience, the evaluation and redesign of work, support and well-being of practitioners, professional development, improvement in service quality, and the consolidation of role identity (Femminini et al., 2024). Through these pillars, the framework fosters a reciprocal connection between theory and practice, enabling critical challenges encountered in the field to be transformed into opportunities for learning and professional growth (Stanzione & Di Genova, 2024).

The theoretical models that have emerged on the national scene can be grouped into five broad approaches: the reflective approach, based on action analysis and learning from experience; the systemic approach, which considers the individual within a network of contextual connections; the socio-material approach, focused on the materiality of spaces, times and bodies; clinical, aimed at deconstructing implicit representations and tacit knowledge; and finally, the integrated approach (Ferrante & Galimberti, 2018; Olivieri, 2020). Among these, the reflective approach appears to be the most widespread, taking the form of a dialogical space for collaborative learning that is essential for "caring for those who care" and supporting the resilience of professionals exposed to high emotional demands (Cadei et al., 2021; Stiozzi, 2018).

Numerous empirical studies also highlight how supervision acts as a protective factor against work-related stress and burnout. Not only does it reduce professional isolation and emotional exhaustion, but it also enhances crucial soft skills such as empathy, social awareness, and conflict management skills (Bottini et al., 2020; Cruells, 2014; Stillman et al., 2020). In this sense,

supervision fits within the Job Demands–Resources Model (JDR) paradigm, serving as a work resource that helps balance the sector's high emotional demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). However, research emphasizes that the mere formal existence of the supervision arrangement does not automatically guarantee these benefits; its effectiveness largely depends on perceived quality, the regularity of meetings, and the supervisor's specific expertise (Femminini et al., 2026).

Supervision takes on particular significance in highly complex contexts such as domiciliary education , where the practitioner often works alone yet must be able to think as part of a team (Salerni, 2020). In these settings, the supervision mechanism serves as an invisible infrastructure that transforms the hardships of daily work into pathways to meaning and shared planning (Madriz, 2021).

Although the scientific literature and recent legislation agree that pedagogical supervision is an essential component of service quality, there is a significant gap between the theoretical and regulatory frameworks and the actual practices of education professionals. As highlighted by the systematic literature review, most of the available research is theoretical, leaving a lack of empirical evidence to confirm the actual impact of this approach on workers' well-being and professional development. In particular, although theory identifies supervision as a protective factor, there is a lack of systematic studies that explain the mechanisms by which it influences mental health and work engagement.

This study addresses this knowledge gap by testing two key logical links that have emerged:

- Social-emotional skills as mediators: the literature identifies the development of empathy and emotional self-regulation as benefits of supervision. This study aims to demonstrate, through mediation models, that these skills are not merely outcomes, but the channels through which quality supervision generates greater commitment to work.

- From reflection to action in highly emotionally charged contexts: theory describes supervision as a space for group reflection. The research explores this dynamic by applying it to highly critical contexts where team support is lacking, such as domiciliary education.

Through this integrated research design — which combines a quantitative survey and a field trial — the aim is to promote supervision as a structured professional right.

3. Research approaches and methodology

This paper proposes two complementary research approaches:

1. A nationwide quantitative survey, conducted amongst a sample of 320 education professionals, aimed at analyzing the prevalence of pedagogical supervision and its impact on mental well-being, work engagement, and socio-emotional skills2.

2. A research-intervention project, focused on the domiciliary education context, aimed at mapping the specific needs of educators working in isolation and testing a model of professional supervision3.

The two processes and their respective results will be presented separately below, followed by a joint and integrated discussion.

3.1. The quantitative study

The quantitative study presented here employs a cross-sectional correlational design to investigate the impact of pedagogical supervision on various indicators. The survey was structured not only to map the prevalence of this practice within Italian socio-educational services, but above all to analyze how the quality and structural characteristics of supervision (frequency, form, and functions) influence the mental well-being, work engagement, and socio-emotional skills of professionals (Femminini et al., in press).

3.2. Participants and recruitment

The sample consists of 320 education professionals working throughout Italy, selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. The recruitment strategy involved direct contact with approximately 600 Type A social cooperatives — identified via the database of the Ministry of Enterprise and Made in Italy (Ministero delle Imprese e del Made in Italy (MIMIT) — and collaboration with the main professional associations in the sector, such as APEI, CONPED and ANPE.

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[2] Some of the results are available at: Femminini, A., Stanzione, I., & Salerni, A. (in press). La supervisione professionale nei contesti socio-educativi: diffusione, pratiche e implicazioni per la qualità dei servizi. *Pedagogia Più Didattica*.

[3] Project reference number RP12419108388775: “Pedagogical supervision: analysing needs and testing a model in the context of home education.”

3.3. Data collection tools

An online structured questionnaire, divided into five main sections, was used to collect data:

1. Pedagogical supervision: this collects data on the existence of the arrangement, its frequency and the functions assigned to it (educational, support or administrative). To measure perceived satisfaction, an 8-item unidimensional scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.955$) was used to assess dimensions such as the supervisor's competence, the regularity of meetings, and the emotional climate.

2. Mental well-being: assessed using the Italian version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) (Gremigni & Stewart-Brown, 2011) in its Italian version, designed to assess workers' emotional functioning and optimism.

3. Work engagement: measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Pisanti et al., 2008) across its three dimensions of vigor, dedication, and involvement.

4. Organizational context: assessed using the HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool (MSIT) (Rondinone et al., 2012), which analyses psychosocial risk factors such as support from colleagues and line managers, control over work, and change management.

5. Social-emotional skills: assessed using the EI (PcSc) questionnaire (Mehta & Singh, 2013), adapted for the Italian context (re-adapted by Stanzione et al., 2024), which examines six specific dimensions: empathy, social awareness, emotional self-awareness, goal orientation, emotional self-regulation, and teamwork skills.

3.4. Procedures and data analysis

The survey was administered in a pseudo-anonymous manner via the Google Forms platform between March and July 20254. The analyses, conducted using Jamovi 2.5.3, involved calculating descriptive statistics and frequencies to map

[4] The research protocol was approved in advance by the Ethics Committee for Transdisciplinary Research (CERT) at Sapienza University of Rome (CERT_1907E5BBCFF)

the prevalence of the device5. Welch's ANOVA was used to investigate differences between groups, whilst the relationships between satisfaction with supervision and work outcomes were analyzed using correlations and linear regression models. Finally, mediation model was tested to examine whether emotional self-regulation served as a mechanism by which supervision influenced work engagement.

4. Results of the quantitative survey: mediating mechanisms between supervision and work engagement

The analysis of quantitative data from a sample of 320 education professionals enabled us to test a mediation model investigating the mechanisms by which satisfaction with pedagogical supervision influences work engagement. Specifically, it was hypothesized that emotional self-regulation serves as a mediating variable in this relationship, consistent with the Job Demands–Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

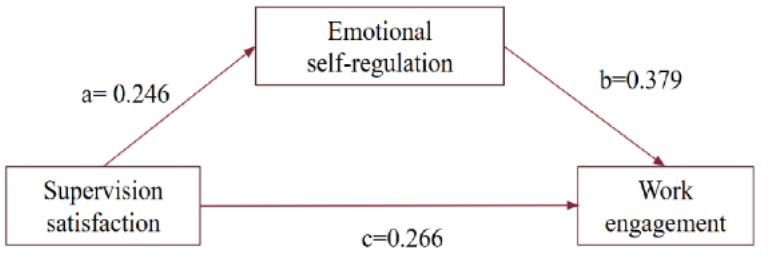


Figure 1: Mediation model

The results of the mediation model (Figure 1) indicate that:

- Satisfaction with supervision positively and significantly predicts professionals' emotional self-regulation (path a = 0.246).
- Emotional self-regulation, in turn, is a significant predictor of work engagement (path b = 0.379).

[5] See the article by Femminini, A., Stanzione, I., & Salerni, A. (in press): La supervisione professionale nei contesti socio-educativi: diffusione, pratiche e implicazioni per la qualità dei servizi. *Pedagogia Più Didattica*.

- The indirect effect of supervision on work engagement, mediated by emotional self-regulation, is 0.093.

- The direct effect remains significant (path c = 0.266), resulting in a total effect of the model of 0.359.

These findings confirm that pedagogical supervision does not act solely through a direct effect on the worker's well-being and commitment, but operates by enhancing the professional's personal resources. In particular, the ability to identify, manage, and regulate emotional experiences — defined in the literature as emotional literacy — emerges as the primary channel through which reflective practice translates into greater energy and dedication in the workplace (Stillman et al., 2020).

5. The supervision program

The pedagogical supervision program, specifically designed for domiciliary education professionals, involved a team of six educators working in the Rome metropolitan area. The services they provide include integrated home-based care interventions and social housing programs for individuals and families experiencing vulnerability, extreme marginalization, or housing emergencies. These projects aim to enhance autonomy and community inclusion through support with daily living activities, socio-educational guidance, and active measures to combat social isolation.

The program was structured around six sessions held every three weeks. The methodological framework is based on the Gestalt contact cycle (Perls, 1973), a model that describes the process by which individuals organize their experiences and interact with their environment. Within this framework, supervision is understood as a tool to support the educator in navigating the phases of pre-contact, contact, full contact, and post-contact, facilitating the emergence of key elements (needs, conflicts, emotions) from the background of day-to-day practice.

5.1. Structure of the program and methodological approaches

The program was structured around the use of symbolic mediators and expressive tools, chosen to facilitate emotional literacy and the re-evaluation of working practices in the context of professional isolation. The structure of the sessions is as follows:

Pre-contact phase: emergence of the professional self

- Objective: to facilitate the emergence of latent needs and to reconstruct professional identity through the worker's historical memory.

- Tools and methods used: individual psychocollage was employed for the visual representation of desires and fears, and the professional genogram was used to map the key junctures and significant figures that have shaped the educator's career.

- Needs identified: participants highlighted a chronic lack of time and a marked sense of professional isolation, exacerbated by the difficulty of finding their bearings in situations involving highly complex interpersonal dynamics.

Contact phase: mobilizing in response to the crisis

- Objective: to identify and analyze the factors causing stagnation that hinder the effectiveness of educational intervention.

- Tools and methods used: DAS (Desires, Actions, Skills) modeling was introduced to draw up learning agreements, alongside a role-play exercise centered on the metaphor of the 'hole', used to identify recurring setbacks and the resources needed to reactivate the reflective process.

- Needs identified: the need emerged to manage frustration and feelings of helplessness in the face of situations of extreme marginalization, as well as to counter professional inertia and operational stagnation.

Full Contact and Post-Contact phases: concrete objectives for change

- Objective: to process the traumatic or critical experience through symbolic distancing, facilitating the assimilation of new insights.

- Tools and methods used: the central approach was the analysis of the critical incident, subsequently transposed into a fictional story in which each participant objectified their own limitations and potential through metaphorical fictional characters. Subsequently, using the 'daisy of possibilities', work was carried out to identify concrete actions to be taken to bring about change towards the fulfillment of professional needs.

- Needs identified: the professionals expressed a need to recognize their own relational responsibility and the necessity of positive anger as a source of energy for managing organizational dynamics, integrating human fragility with the firmness required by their role.

6. Discussion

Integrating data from the quantitative survey with findings from the supervision process provides an overview of pedagogical supervision as essential infrastructure not only for staff well-being but also for service quality. The overall results confirm that, in a context marked by the introduction of the LEPS and Law 55/2024, supervision can no longer be regarded as a luxury or an ancillary measure, but rather as a structural and quality requirement.

A key finding of the quantitative study is that the mere existence of a supervision mechanism does not, in itself, guarantee positive outcomes in terms of well-being. This evidence is closely linked to the needs that emerged during the supervision process: home-based educators experience constant time pressure and a high workload, conditions in which occasional or poorly structured supervision risks being perceived as yet another bureaucratic formality rather than a genuine professional resource.

In line with the Job Demands–Resources model, supervision functions as an effective work resource only when it is perceived as having quality—quality that takes shape around elements such as continuity over time, the supervisor's competence, and the clarity of the supervision goals. It is the combination of these aspects that enables supervision to support teamwork and foster authentic professional engagement, transforming collegial discussion into a stable and meaningful operational process.

Socio-emotional competences play a central role in this framework. The validated mediation model shows that supervision promotes well-being by strengthening professionals' ability to recognize and manage their own experiences. This indirect effect clarifies how reflective practice becomes a source of work energy: what generates engagement is not the technical solution to a specific case, but rather the reinforcement of the worker's personal resources.

The methodological approach based on the Gestalt contact cycle clarifies how this empowerment takes place. The use of symbolic mediators (psychocollage, genograms, fantasy stories) has enabled the project's educators to move from "pre-contact" to the crisis of awareness, "full contact," transforming struggles into opportunities for planning. In this sense, pedagogical supervision is confirmed as a space for emotional literacy that cannot be reduced to any technical support, as it is grounded in intentionality and relational responsibility.

The discrepancy between theory (which views supervision as a right) and practice (which shows its absence in 42% of the sample) underscores the urgent need to professionalize the role of the pedagogical supervisor. The critical issues identified reflect the fragility of a system that is still trying to define its professional boundaries.

In conclusion, this paper suggests two main implications: one is at the organizational level, as it is necessary to shift from a crisis-response approach to one of structural care, ensuring that regular meetings are held as a minimum service standard even for professional educators; the other is at the training level, where there is an urgent need for specialized programs (master's degrees or advanced training courses) that equip educators with specific skills in group facilitation and the use of reflective mediators, moving beyond improvisation and raising the quality of supervision. In this way, we can work concretely—even indirectly—toward the recognition of the professional role. Only by institutionalizing this "work-in-progress" will it be possible to support education professionals in facing the challenges of daily complexity, ensuring that human relationships remain the irreplaceable cornerstone of every care intervention.

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