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## Coaching and Mentoring in Bachelor's Degree Programs for Social Workers and Teachers

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### Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of coaching strategies used in the final stage of undergraduate programs for social workers and teachers for primary and preschool education in order to identify "best practice" of coaching and mentoring. To achieve this goal we used comparative analysis of models of coaching based on the following criteria: the satisfaction of university students, and trainers related to the methods used; the students/teachers's perceptions of the effectiveness of the methods used; the consumption of resources (material, human and time). A comparison of coaching activities in the two specializations was made to identify innovation opportunities for training in undergraduate programs for teachers and social workers education. Professionals in these fields have in common the conditions of the agency and direct relationship with clients (adults and/or children) and the condition of people with training goals and empowerment. The assumptions from which we started the research were: (I1) a method is "best practice" when student satisfaction with the coaching method used positively correlated with satisfaction of his coach regarding the same method; (I2) there is a "best practice" if the student's perception of effectiveness is positively correlated with the perceived effectiveness of the method by coach, (I3) a method "best practice" implies reduced consumption of resources, time and human energy. Coaching labs are designed to develop individual skills for successfully performing the roles of professionals in social work and primary and preschool education. Analysis methods were made based on cognitive paradigm (efficiency and effectiveness of training methods is assessed by each participant in the coaching program by referring each event to his/her cognitions) and experiential paradigm (experiencing one method allows participants to express their own set of critical factors of satisfaction/performance indicators that constitute a frame of reference for establishing best-practice). The research is qualitative, exploratory; we used semi-structured interviews and surveys. Information was gathered from a sample of intent, unstructured, consisting of a group of 60 students and 3 coaches. The research results confirmed the first hypothesis, showing the conditions necessary for consideration of a method as "best practice".

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### 1. The context of Coaching and Mentoring Laboratories

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The generation of the third millennium is strongly demanding a concrete, pragmatic, objective and rational approach of the learning goals, therefore the actors responsible for initial professional training are looking for educational programs which are oriented to training and development of instrumentally applied competences for each line of specialization. Training of these abilities is facilitated by educational programs of coaching and mentoring, as learning of professional behaviour cannot be thought in a smaller way as an activity of mimicry or simple actions directed, planned and controlled. Training in a profession, especially if it involves firstly the interaction between two or more people, involves personal development on a professional development line. Just this personal and professional development is pursued in the laboratories of coaching and mentoring in initial training of future social workers and teachers / educators. The need for development of these laboratories was felt in previous years due to the following: - low ability of the students to correlate the informational level of the competence (know) with the skills (can) and especially with the attitudes (I have the right attitude) and to authentically and effectively integrate these into a whole unit of professional identity; both professions require "in action" the entire personality system, that is good self-awareness and personal development; both professions involve interacting with others and, consequently, development of emotional intelligence and social intelligence; rapid changes in society (overall) and employment market (in particular) require creativity and updating not only informational, but also in terms of strategies of action (in a postmodern society "to be" determines "to have" and "to do").

### *1.1. Coaching & Mentoring - Brief Overview*

The term "coach" has an etymology disputed between French, English, Hungarian, Czech and even Latin; in the sixteenth century the word signified diligence/carriages for transportation of persons and, in the ancient time, the role of individuals who handle horses during battles (which implied carriages). At the end of the nineteenth century, the term was used in the sense of tutor, mentor in the Anglophone universities. The actual meaning was imposed in the second half of the twentieth century in management industry. Since the 90s, there were developed domestic and international organizations (IFC) to regulate the activities of coaching. *Stricto-sensum*, the term means "the accompanying help/assistance" (Vincent Lenhardt apud. Angel P., Amar P., Devienne E., Tence J., 2008). Coaching is a fundamental activity of psychological and pedagogical paradigms, as well as "a psychological process that leads to behaviour change" (Skiffington S., Zeus P., 2008). According to International Federation of Coaching, coaching has been defined as a process of assistance and support in order to achieve optimal personal and professional development (Kilburg, 1996; Nowack, 2003). Coaching does not involve teaching or tutoring students on a specific thematic content, but the person who conducts coaching activities initiates a process of professional and personal development of students accessing information that they already possess, but not use them in effectively. Coaching focuses on development of a number of complex strategies for personal and professional development, based on internalizing characteristics of professional behaviour. Importance of the coaching in bachelor degree programs of social workers/teachers is derived from applied component of laboratories of coaching and the internships in different institutions of practice. Laboratory procedurals allow the coach to facilitate in students the awareness of principles, standards, procedures, and testing concrete ways of engaging in professional action. Coaching Lab allows students to use and practice critical thinking and reflection, which generates deep involvement, conscious, rational and logical, into adopting practical professional behaviour.

Mentoring is identified as a unidirectional professional relationship established between two parties (expert/mentor and novice/beginner), in which the mentor is the resource for training, a professional model that novice / beginner must follow in the context and specific conditions of professional learning. For the case studied, professional mentoring as educational processes is led by academics with experience in the social work field and teaching field and whose responsibilities are focused around the following activities: monitoring, direct coordination, information, guidance, assistance to achieve specialty practice in specialized institutions, resorts for future employability. In this context, we talk about "work integrated learning" (Atchison, M., Pollock, S.,

Reeders, E. & Rizzeti, J., 2002), that is a process through which it can be determined the correlation between cognitive skills and instrumental applications, to focus on understanding the role and effects of internship training. Therefore, the mentoring places the student in a specific environment for professional conduct, where the student has the possibility to test, to put into practice the theories learned, to know the specific organizational culture, to experience real work situations and relevant to the future professional training.

### *1.2. Coaching and mentoring: similarities and differences*

In this context, we identify the following similarities between coaching and mentoring processes: both require, for the parties involved, well developed interpersonal skills for listening and dialogue, allowing personal development based on a partnership and trust, stimulate self actualisation and responsibility to correct errors. Differences identified between mentoring and coaching are: mentoring implies actions of guidance and control, helping the disciples to clarify and to project their professional future, while coaching identifies and analyses resources that are considered necessary for further development through personal effort.

## **2. The problem of research**

Coaching and Mentoring Laboratories conducted in the third year (final year for undergraduate level) in both majors, have the goal to exercise the role-taking and role-playing of the future profession, to facilitate professional integration. In this respect, it aims to develop general and specific skills of the professional status-roles and their integration in the complex system of cognitions, emotions, skills and attitudes of each student to build an individual professional profile. Thus, coaching and mentoring strategies are intended to develop awareness of personal potential in the sphere of professional skills, individuals' vision of the professional status-role, motivation to practice, mobilize personal resources; it focuses on the active involvement in "action situation", followed by critical reflection about the "occupational actions." On this idea, ones can consider the coaching and mentoring laboratories innovation opportunities for training in undergraduate programs for teachers and social workers education. The aim of the research was to identify "best practice" of coaching and mentoring strategies used in initial training of the students from Social Work School and Education Sciences School (ESS).

### *2.1. Research methodology*

In order to achieve the goal of research three groups of students were chosen (two groups from Social Work and a group specializing in ESS), a total of 60 students, each group was attributed a teacher as mentor and coach. The research was conducted during the first semester of the current academic year, in amount a total of 28 hours lab per group.

The assumptions from which we started the research were: (H1) a method is "best practice" when student satisfaction with the used coaching method positively correlated with satisfaction of his coach regarding the same method; (H2) there is a "best practice" if the student's perception of effectiveness is positively correlated with the coach's perceived effectiveness of the method, (H3) a method "best practice" implies reduced consumption of resources, time and human energy. The analysis of coaching strategies was done from cognitive paradigm (efficiency and effectiveness of training methods is assessed by each participant of the training event by reporting it to his/hers cognitions) and experiential paradigm (experiencing one method allows participants to express their own set of critical factors of satisfaction/effectiveness indicators which constitute a frame of reference for establishing best-practice).

The research is exploratory; Coaching and Mentoring Laboratories are just "starting out" in the university educational programs. The research was born out of the need for inter-vision and feedback to academics coaching activity in the laboratory. The research methods used were questionnaire and semi-structured interview methods (the peer-group discussion). Questionnaires were administrated to the students and coaches at the end of each laboratory, containing some questions to assess satisfaction and open-ended questions to encourage the expression of opinions on issues that could be changed, improved or just added. The group interviews were conducted at mid-term (for a first feedback) and at the end of the semester and focused on

investigating the perception of the two poles of the coaching process (students and coaches) on the effectiveness of the strategies used. At the meeting attended each of the three coaches and nine students (chosen by three of each group in relation to the criteria: common in all laboratories, desire to participate in these interviews and random selection if necessary).

Student/coach satisfaction regarding coaching strategy is defined as a complex psychological state of appreciation in varying degrees in relation to coaching and mentoring activities attended. There were identified three axes against which to measure (with scale five sizes) participants satisfaction (either student or coach): coach – student alliance (the interaction, communication and relationship of trust between the two poles), coaching content (objectives set, information circulated, practiced skills, values and attitudes demonstrated/developed) and coaching process (methods and techniques addressed by coach). Effectiveness of activities (defined as achieving goals with adequate methods) was also investigated from the perspective of the participants involved in the coaching and mentoring and it has been analysed in the peer-group interviews by discussing/questioning the perception of the effectiveness of strategies used (based on the principle that underlies all learning situation and development: learning is facilitated by awareness degree of ability development concerned by reference to their objectives). Peer-group interviews focused on using arguments (reasoning) about the perceived effectiveness of strategies used (if the coaching methods and techniques used were appropriate to the objectives of each unit of coaching, development needs and potential of the students, and the need to improve or change them); also, there were discussions about the resource consumption: measurement for material (like consumables and paper, writing, drawing-, laptop and projector, or other), time (if used strategy required more/less time to achieve a certain goal) and human-energy (how exhausting were).

Regarding the methods and techniques used by the three coaches, they were chosen in relation to the objectives of each stage of coaching, ranging from cognitive-behavioural strategies, experiential, transactional analysis and systemic model.

## *2.2. Research results*

The results demonstrated the following: satisfaction with alliance coach-students presented the highest scores (compared with other items) from both students and the coaches/mentors, which is very important considering the relationship confidence is the main factor in the change process initiated by coaching. It was also found that differences in coaching strategy resulted in no significant differences (out of 62 students, only 10% had responses with low values) in shaping satisfaction to the alliance. In terms of satisfaction to the contents of coaching, item "objective" had lower scores in the ESS group of students (47% of these values  $\leq 3$ ) which could be explained by the fact that their expectations are more demanding and more traditionalist than those from Social Work specialization due to stronger social representations at an unconscious level (as teaching professions are by far long standing and well known in social system), which are basically transmitted through the social discourse and assimilated almost unconscious by children/teenagers, and not negotiated, constructed during initial/basic training - such as in the case of social worker profession. On the other hand, discussions in the groups highlighted the failure of the practice period (only two semesters) of the PIPP, students wishing to offset shortages through coaching laboratories. Considering the fact that the objectives set and communicated to each laboratory were actually different aspects of the professional status-role competencies, may be surprising that the items "skills and attitudes developed" average scores were higher in all groups (3,7). Average degree of satisfaction to the methods and techniques used was high (above 4 in all subjects, including teachers), thus strengthening intuitions coaches originally founded by theories and oriented by personality structures of each, but also by goals stated. Global average satisfaction from coaching activities for students was 3.6, correlating with the global average of teachers (3.7).

Regarding the effectiveness of coaching strategies, results showed variations in perceived effectiveness by students assessed against different criteria, so the issues about relationships (both with the coach, and with other colleagues) and development/"thawing "potential participants, methods rated as most effective were the experiential orientation. For the issue "personal objectives of development" the cognitive strategies were considered to be more efficient. Other criteria against which opinions were expressed to the effectiveness of

coaching strategies were: methods used to practice/develop various skills (especially those of self-knowledge and knowing of others), update/development of motivation for profession, activation/development of creative potential, the discovery of disabling cognitions/mental schemes/attitudes (with negative impact on professional activities). Effectiveness perception of their coaching styles of the three teachers is loaded inherent with subjectivity due to the personality of each coach. Findings of the discussions was that in evaluating the effectiveness of coaching strategy the most important are the perceptions / opinions of coaching beneficiaries, regardless of the methods that coach perceived as most effective. Important is that beneficiaries can provide / communicate these perceptions constantly, which is an important feedback for the evolution of the entire coaching process. Hypothesis two is not confirmed as students perceived effectiveness of coaching strategies used does not positively correlate with perception of the coach.

Regarding the third hypothesis, the research data showed that consumption aspects of material resources and of human-energy (operationalized in the concept of "exhaustion" felt at the end of each coaching meetings) can't be a criterion for considering a strategy viable as "best practice"; that is because this variable is indispensable for quality of any activity, regardless of the quantity/volume of material consumption, but mainly because the consumption of human energy is dependent not only on the type of strategy used, but also on the physical condition, psycho-emotional conditions and interests of each participant in the process of coaching (either coach or student).

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the assessment of coaching strategies as "best practice" depends largely on subjective (experience and interpretation of subjective experience) of the participants in the coaching process, and to a lesser extent the specificity of each method. Research only valid criterion for considering "best practice" was that of satisfaction about the coaching strategy used.

In this analytical framework (context), we also consider that student satisfaction with coaching methods used in Coaching Laboratory stimulates participation and active involvement in the experimental teaching approach, which allows participating students, upon completion of the university program, a better representation and successful understanding of the future professional roles.

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