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# Coaching technologies in sociometry specialists' professional self-development in supporting families with children having special needs

## Tecnologías de coaching en sociometría autodesarrollo profesional de especialistas en apoyo a familias con niños con necesidades especiales

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### Abstract

The aim of the article was to evaluate the effectiveness of coaching technologies in training social workers to work with families that have children with special needs.

The research involved the following methods: formative experiment, where the Professional Coaching technology is implemented as an influence; tests as tools to determine the level of theoretical knowledge, Job Satisfaction Test, Ontogenetic Reflection Self-Assessment Test; observation to determine the specialists' communication skills level; statistical data processing. The research involved two samples - experimental and control, which included social workers. Social Competence Model in working with families that have children with special needs was developed, which consists of motivational-value, cognitive, communicative-activity and reflective criteria.

The dominance of medium levels of social workers' social competence in working with families that have



children with special needs was found. The effectiveness of the developed coaching system is proved. It was found that the formative influence is more effective for the cognitive and reflexive criteria than for motivational-value and communicative-activity criteria. The obtained results can be guidelines for further improvement of the developed Professional Coaching system. Further research prospects involve studying the impact of coaching on the self-development of not only social workers but also other sociology specialists.

**Keywords:** coaching, sociology specialists, social competence, motivational-value criterion, cognitive criterion, communicative-activity criterion, reflective criterion.

## Resumen

El objetivo del artículo fue evaluar la efectividad de las tecnologías de entrenamiento en la capacitación de trabajadores sociales para trabajar con familias que tienen niños con necesidades especiales.

La investigación involucró los siguientes métodos: experimento formativo, donde se implementa como influencia la tecnología del Coaching Profesional; pruebas como herramientas para determinar el nivel de conocimientos teóricos, Prueba de Satisfacción Laboral, Prueba de Autoevaluación de Reflexión Ontogenética; observación para determinar el nivel de habilidades comunicativas de los especialistas; procesamiento de datos estadísticos. La investigación involucró dos muestras - experimental y de control, que incluyeron trabajadores sociales. Se desarrolló el Modelo de Competencia Social en el trabajo con familias que tienen niños con necesidades especiales, el cual consta de criterios motivacionales-valorativos, cognitivos, comunicativos-actividad y reflexivos.

Se encontró el predominio de niveles medios de competencia social de los trabajadores sociales en el trabajo con familias que tienen niños con necesidades especiales. Se demuestra la eficacia del sistema de coaching desarrollado. Se encontró que la influencia formativa es más efectiva para los criterios cognitivo y reflexivo que para los criterios motivacional-valorativo y comunicativo-actividad. Los resultados obtenidos pueden ser pautas para seguir mejorando el sistema de Coaching Profesional desarrollado. Otras perspectivas de investigación implican estudiar el impacto del coaching en el desarrollo personal no solo de los trabajadores sociales sino también de otros especialistas en sociología.

**Palabras clave:** coaching, especialistas en sociología, competencia social, criterio valor motivacional, criterio cognitivo, criterio actividad comunicativa, criterio reflexivo.

## 1. Introduction

According to Tiulpa (2020b), the realization of social influences and purposeful interaction between people are the basis of sociological professions. Kuzan (2018) believes that a specialist working in the "Person to Person" system should be focused on continuous self-development throughout his or her career. The above urges finding effective methods of professional development of sociology specialists. Research on the implementation of coaching technology is noteworthy in this context.

Coaching is a popular and complex technology that has proven its effectiveness in training specialists in different fields (including sociology specialists): teachers (Lofthouse, 2019), nurses (Narayanasamy & Penney, 2014), (Schwellnus and Carnahan, 2014), surgeons (Granchi et al., 2021). Ray (2017) proved the effectiveness of trainings for the development of communication skills and abilities of teachers. Porras et al., (2018) studied socio-psychological mechanisms of coaching in professional development. Nevmerzhitska et al., (2020) studied various aspects of the use of coaching in the company management structure. Hollweck (2020) emphasized the role of coaching in developing the professional qualities of teachers who are just beginning their careers. Therefore, substantiation of the effectiveness of the use of coaching in the professional development of sociology specialists is a very topical area of research. At the same time, the above-mentioned researchers focus mainly on representatives of pedagogical and medical

specialties. So, we state that the coaching mechanisms in working with the representatives of other socionomic professions are poorly studied. In particular, there are almost no studies on the implementation of coaching in the training of social workers.

The activities of social workers are associated with a number of specific competencies, which sometimes require more than just study at a higher education institution. Myronova (2017) believes that this is especially true of working with children that have special needs, as well as their families. This area requires special approaches, and their development involves the use of innovative methods of pedagogical influence, in particular, coaching.

So, the topicality of the research is related to the following considerations:

- the relevance of the use of coaching technology in the professional self-development of specialists;
- need to find new effective methods of professional self-development of sociology specialists;
- insufficient coverage of issues in existing research;
- the urgency of developing new approaches to training for work with children that have special needs.

The aim of the article is to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching technologies in training social workers for work with families that have children with special needs. Research objectives:

- 1) develop criteria and indicators of social workers' social competence in working with families that have children with special needs;
- 2) find out the empirical indicators of social workers' social competence to work with families that have children with special needs;
- 3) evaluate the effectiveness of the formative experiment, which involves the implementation of coaching technologies in self-development of sociology specialists.

## 2. Literature Review

Coaching is a mutual assistance system, where the coach and the client set goals and select the most optimal ways to achieve them. According to Grant (2013), it is primarily focused on self-learning and client's personal development, where the coach supports him or her in achieving the goal. Coaching originated in sports, so it was identified with training for a long time. Coaching has a number of features: 1) real-time feedback in order to achieve optimal results; 2) setting individual goals, while their achievement is assisted by the coach; 3) the focus on finding new ways of carrying out certain activities; 4) participants are responsible for changes; 5) the competence of the coach in the relevant field (Lovell, 2018). Wolfenden (2020) considered support, respect and focus on customer development as important features of the studied phenomenon. So, coaching is a more democratic and humanistic means of achieving the client's goals compared to training.

Researchers distinguish four stages of coaching: 1) establishing the principles of relations — the formation of goals, parameters and ethical constraints of the future interaction; 2) initial assessment (diagnosis) of training participants — systemic and personal; 3) formation and implementation of an action plan — development of an algorithm of activity that provides for an active involvement of participants in the process; 4) evaluation of the results of the implemented plan and its revision, if necessary (Deiorio et al., 2016).

According to Van Zyl et al., (2020), the approach which distinguishes the following stages of coaching is more detailed: building relationships; establishing feedback; development of an ideal image of desired changes; formulation of realistic goals; realization of influence on the client's personality; assessment of the effectiveness of actions taken; capacity building; termination of relations and agreement on further

cooperation. The emphasis on the individual's strengths in the process of influence is an important point (Peláez et al., 2019). Gettman et al., (2019) emphasize the importance of drawing up agreements between participants to improve the effectiveness of coaching. Kamarudin et al., (2020) consider coaching as one of the essential components of successful professional development. The use of positive psychological coaching focused on the client's available resources is effective for the professional development of the individual (Richter et al., 2021; Udovychenko et al., 2021). Dyess et al., (2017) proved the effectiveness of coaching programmes for the development of emotional resilience, leadership skills and improving the performance of the team of health-care workers.

The training of sociometry specialists is of great importance for building a healthy and efficient society. According to Kosharna (2020), the culture of professional thinking; communication skills; professional self-awareness; motives and needs of professional development are the main criteria for professional success of future sociometry specialists. Kuzan (2018) emphasized the role of innovative methods in the training of sociometry specialists, while Furduy et al., (2020) took into account the general psychological and pedagogical aspects in the formation of professional competencies. Social work as an activity that involves helping people who are in particularly difficult conditions occupies a special place among sociometric professions. Hudson et al., (2021); Watts (2021) note that continuous professional development throughout life is essential for the effectiveness of this industry. It should be noted that the training of sociometry specialists is mainly studied in the context of the student period. At the same time, Pryshliak (2014) studied the role of professional associations in the development of sociometry specialists. Helping the families that have children with special needs is a particularly sensitive and problematic area that requires constant professional development.

Brown and Clark (2017) found that the attitude of parents to children with special needs is determined by a number of factors: the age of children, their physiological and psychological condition, professional employment of parents and management attitudes to the problem, emotional background of family relationships. McConnell and Savage (2015) note that caring for children with special needs is an additional stressor for parents. In this context, López-Liria et al., (2020); Bourke-Taylor et al., (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of the programmes to increase stress resilience and optimize the mental health of parents of children with special needs. Lara and de los Pinos (2017) identified the main aspects that determine the need for social assistance to such families: imbalance of the family system, parents' neglect of their own needs, lack of basic knowledge about health and education of children with special needs, the need to adapt. Myronova (2017) stated that the development of pedagogical competence of parents in interaction with children with special needs is an important area of work. According to Hughes (2016), the main competencies of such activities include self-regulation, assessment of possible harm, decision-making in difficult situations, writing quality reports. At the same time, studies of the use of coaching in the development of the competence of specialists in working with such families are sporadic (Berezovska, 2019).

The literature review gives grounds to ascertain that there is a lack of consistent research on the use of coaching to develop the competence of specialists in working with families that have children with special needs.

### 3. Methodology

The study consisted of the following stages:

- Organizational stage (early spring of 2021) — drawing up a research plan, selecting empirical and diagnostic methods, determining samples, obtaining consent to participate in experimental work.
- Primary diagnostic test (March 2021) —collection of empirical data on the social workers' social competence with further analysis.

- Experimental stage (April — June 2021) — the implementation of coaching technology in cooperation with social workers. The work was performed by qualified specialists and was individualized to the maximum possible extent in compliance with the requirements of the method used.
- Secondary diagnostic test (July — August 2021) — recurrent collection and processing of empirical data on the manifestations of the components of social workers' social competence in working with families that have children with special needs.
- Interpretation stage (September-October 2021) — summarizing the effectiveness of the use of coaching technology.

The research procedures were conducted by the authors of the article and competent specialists who have experience in the relevant field.

The samples were formed on the basis of 17 Social Service Centres in Kyiv. The study involved specialists who had experience in the social sphere — from two to twenty years. Two samples were formed for the experiment — control (69 people) and experimental (81 people). Quantitative and qualitative composition of research groups meets the representativeness requirements. The study used a set of methods: general theoretical; testing, observation, formative experiment, statistical methods. General theoretical methods — analysis, synthesis and generalization of theoretical material. At this stage, Tiulpa (2020a) proposed the structure of social workers' social competence.

The following criteria of social workers' social competence in working with families that have children with special needs are identified.

#### Motivational-value criterion

The level of motivation for professional activity, a value understanding of the world around and their own profession in the context of the specifics of the profession. Means of diagnostics of the criterion - Job Satisfaction Test.

#### Cognitive criterion

The level of knowledge about working with families that have children with special needs. Diagnostic tool — tests to determine the level of knowledge of the social worker on the problem of interaction with the families that have children with special needs.

#### Communicative-activity criterion

Different tests that had similar topics of relevant professional assignments were conducted to measure the level of communicative skills and abilities in the primary and secondary diagnostics. Observation was used as a diagnostic tool.

#### Reflective criterion

The level of the self-analysis and self-evaluation skills in the performance of particular professional assignments. Diagnostic tool - Ontogenetic Reflection Self-Assessment Test.

The level of each criteria is determined by three levels of indicators — high, medium, low. These levels are distinguished according to test scales and particular semantic parameters of observation.

#### Testing



Included the use of tools to diagnose motivational-value, cognitive and reflective criteria of social workers' social competence. The validity of the test methods used was verified by expert evaluation. The psychologists and social workers with extensive experience (more than ten years) played the role of experts. The stimulus material of the test devices was compared with the theoretical models of the studied phenomena.

#### Observation

The observation focused on the manifestations of the communicative-activity criterion of social competence. The researchers focused on the following parameters - mastering verbal and nonverbal means of communication, the effectiveness of influence on the individual, the ability to understand and empathize, tact, taking into account age and individual characteristics in professional communication.

#### Formative experiment

The experiment is the key method used to confirm the research hypothesis. Coaching social workers to increase competence in working with families that have children with special needs was taken as an independent variable. Social workers' social competence was the dependent variable. The experimental sample was divided into subgroups 15-20 people each to introduce the formative influence. Group and individual forms of work were combined. This approach was taken to improve the effectiveness of coaching. The main topics to be mastered by the participants were: "Psychological and pedagogical characteristics of children with special needs", "Socio-psychological characteristics of families that have children with special needs", "Features of communication of social workers with children with special needs", "Features of communication of social workers with parents of children with special needs". We focused on training for work with families that have children with musculoskeletal disorders and injuries for the purity of the experiment given that the concept of "special needs" is broad.

Coaching was individualized, that is the features of each specialist were identified, thus determining the specifics of the further consultation process. Attention was focused on constant reflection of the acquired knowledge and skills. Interaction with participants was carried out both directly and remotely. Note that the control group participants were asked to study the self-learning materials independently.

#### Statistical methods

Percentage analysis, Student's t-test. These tools allow establishing the effectiveness of experimental work and trends in the criteria of social workers' social competence in working with families that have children with special needs. Data analysis was performed using computer software.

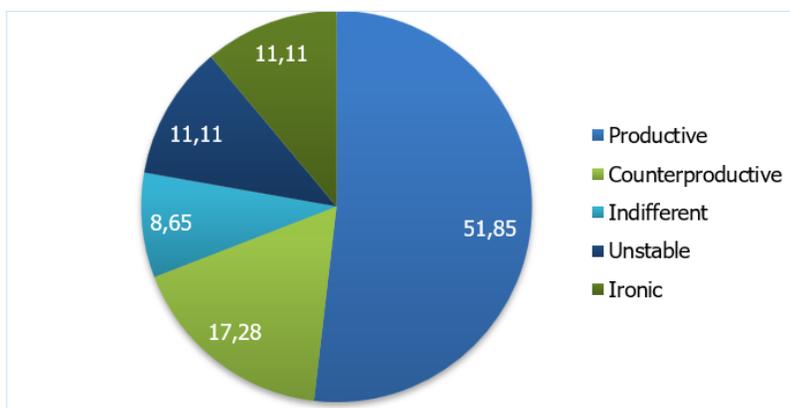
An important aspect of the study was the agreement of the participants, who resolved the ethical contradictions of the research. The content and nature of the methods used did not degrade the subjects.

## 4. Results

The study began with the identification of a number of problems that affected the effectiveness of the formative impact: insufficient or unstable motivation of participants; problems with volitional regulation of activity; passive aggression and superiority of some participants; difficulties of distance coaching, related, in particular, to the peculiarities of the use of technical equipment and the quality of communication. It should also be noted that two people from the experimental group refused to participate in the study. These specialists were not taken into account in the final data processing.

It should also be noted that two individuals from the experimental group refused to further participate in the study. Those specialists were not taken into account in the final data processing.

The results of observation of the coaching process give grounds for creating a typology of participants' behaviour (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Distribution of types of behaviour of research participants in the course of coaching

It was found that the largest share of the participating specialists belongs to the productive type of interaction. Such people are characterized by high motivation, focus on work, responsible attitude to the tasks and thoughtful attitude to the coach's advice. This type is the most favourable for the implementation of the programme objectives.

Less than one-fifth of the experimental group participants belong to the counterproductive type. Such persons are characterized by proneness to conflict, destructive position, reluctance to perform assignments. At the same time, the representatives of the counterproductive type did not refuse to complete the programme and continued to work.

Less than 10% of participants belong to an indifferent type of behaviour. Such participants are characterized by a lack of emotional focus and cognitive interest in the lessons. The complete the assignments automatically, without any enthusiasm.

Percentages of representatives of unstable and ironic types distributed equally. Participants with an unstable reaction are people who have periods of interest and indifference in relation to self-development. Specialists of the ironic type are characterized by sarcasm, irony, arrogance in relation to the coach's and developmental assignments. Such individuals complete assignments, but there are problems with the emotional background of coaching.

The problems that arose with these participants were solved through the individualization of the approach. Coaches tried to clearly focus and define the goals of participants who behaved unproductively. The strategy of some participants became more constructive in the process of implementing coaching technology. At the same time, fatigue and indifference replaced the initial constructive position of three participants.

It was found that the participants were more enthusiastic about acquiring practical skills than learning theoretical material. Topics related to particular communication practices were also perceived with more interest than general information on children with special needs. The participants were quite emotional about the classes which simulated situations of interaction with the families that have children with special needs.

Below, we analyse the results of empirical research and formative experiment for each of the studied criteria (Table 1). The results of the initial diagnostic test indicate the similarity of the distributions of empirical data in the experimental and control groups.

**Table 1.**

*Dynamics of the levels of criteria of social workers' social competence in working with families that have children with special needs.*

Components of social competence	Levels	Number for the surveyed							
		Control group				Experimental group			
		Before the influence		After the influence		Before the influence		After the influence	
		%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
<b>Motivational-value</b>	Low	24.64	17	26.09	18	25.93	21	6.17	5
	Medium	69.57	48	71.01	49	66.67	54	70.37	57
	High	5.79	4	2.9	2	7.4	6	23.46	19
<b>Cognitive</b>	Low	14.49	10	26.09	18	18.52	15	4.94	4
	Medium	60.87	42	62.32	43	64.2	52	51.85	42
	High	24.64	17	11.59	8	17.28	14	43.21	35
<b>Communicative-activity</b>	Low	26.09	18	23.19	16	27.16	22	7.4	6
	Medium	55.07	38	59.42	41	51.85	42	54.32	44
	High	18.84	13	17.39	12	20.99	17	38.28	31
<b>Reflective</b>	Low	31.88	22	30.44	21	32.1	26	13.58	11
	Medium	60.87	42	62.32	43	58.02	47	51.85	42
	High	7.25	5	7.24	5	9.88	8	34.57	28

The dominance of the medium levels of the motivational-value criterion is recorded. At the same time, low levels of professional motivation and attitude to the profession were found in about a quarter of respondents. High values of the criterion were diagnosed in only a few people.

The medium values dominate in the analysis of trends in a cognitive criterion. A quarter of respondents were diagnosed with high rates. Low values of the cognitive component are lower compared to similar indicators of the motivational-value criterion.

The dominance of medium levels of manifestations of the communicative-activity criterion is recorded. The share of people with low values of the component prevails, compared to the percentage of people with high levels of manifestations.

Approximately one third of the respondents showed low indicators of the reflective criterion of social competence. A high level was recorded in five specialists surveyed. There is a tendency for the predominance of medium levels.

The formative influence resulted in the 19.76% decrease in the indicators of the motivational-value criterion in the experimental group. The share of people with medium levels slightly increased. At the same time, high values increased in 16.06% of respondents. The control group showed insignificant changes, which indicates that the independent assimilation of information does not promote the increase of motivational indicators.

The share of individuals with low rates for cognitive criteria decreased by 13.58% in the experimental group after formative influence. The medium level of knowledge about the families that have children with special needs decreased in 12.35% of respondents. Significant growth of high indicators of cognitive

criterion — 25.93% of respondents — comes into notice. Positive changes were also recorded in the control group. In particular, a decreased percentage of people with low levels was found in 11.6% of respondents. An increase in high rates of study was diagnosed in 13.05%. The share of people with medium values for the component has not changed in quantitative terms. That is, we can state that coaching better promotes the acquisition of professional knowledge than the simple use of educational materials in self-development. Low indicators of communicative-activity criterion changed in 13.58% of the experimental group respondents after the implementation of the independent variable. The percentage of people with medium indicators did not change significantly in quantitative terms. High indicators of activity criterion increased in 17.29% of specialists. There were no significant changes in the studied criterion in the control group.

The control group did not show any significant changes in the reflective criterion of social workers' social competence. In the experimental group, low rates of professional self-analysis decreased by 18.52% after the formative influence. The share of people with medium values decreased slightly. There were 24.69% of the experimental group members who showed an increase in high values of the reflexive criterion (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Indicators of Student's t-test of social competence criteria of social workers in working with families that have children with special needs*

Social competence criteria	Student's t-test	
	Control group	Experimental group
<b>Motivational-value</b>	1.03	2.23*
<b>Cognitive</b>	1.99*	3.14**
<b>Communicative-activity</b>	1.53	2.19*
<b>Reflective</b>	1.49	3.24**

The results of the analysis of percentage changes show the effectiveness of coaching technologies for the development of social competence of sociology specialists in working with families that have children with special needs. Student's t-test was calculated to finally confirm the hypothesis.

The analysis of statistical indicators showed that significant changes were recorded only for cognitive criteria in the control group. There are no statistically significant changes for other social competence components. Changes are recorded for all studied parameters in the experimental group. At the same time, coaching technologies proved to be more effective for cognitive and reflexive criteria ( $p=0.05$ ) than for motivational-value and reflective criteria ( $p=0.01$ ).

## 5. Discussion

In general, cognitive and activity criteria of social competence are better developed in comparison with the motivational and reflective component. This means that knowledge and skills of specialists are more consistent and deeper than the level of professional motivation and effectiveness of self-analysis.

The coaching technologies proved to be effective in the development of social competence, with the changes in the reflective and cognitive components being more significant. The data obtained are supported by opinions of Tidwell and Edwards (2020) on the relationship between self-acquisition of knowledge and the effectiveness of self-analysis. Lovell (2018) also associates the effectiveness of coaching with recorded responsibility of specialists for changes in the structure of professional competencies. Wolfenden (2020) considered friendly attitude and respect of the coach to the participants of the process to be an important thing. At the same time, Berezovska (2019) attached the importance to the technique of active listening,

and Kosharna (2020) — to the focus on the main components of the competence of sociometry specialists. The main stages of coaching determined by Deiorio et al (2016) have been observed in the course of formative influence.

The results obtained on the effectiveness of coaching are consistent with data of other studies on the training of sociometry specialties: teachers (Lofthouse 2019), health workers (Narayanasamy and Penney 2014), social workers (Ishchenko et al. 2022). At the same time, Granchi et al. (2021) stated in a study of surgeons' training that group coaching had a positive effect on general, communicative skills, while individual coaching has failed to provide such an effect. These data contradict the results of our study, where the combination of individual and group approach was productive. This situation can be explained by the specifics of professional development, in particular the greater emotional burnout of surgeons.

In our study, coaches relied on the available resources of specialists — their strengths. According to Richter et al., (2021), this approach confirms the effectiveness of positive psychological coaching. We also explain the effectiveness of the developed formative influence by focusing on the problematic aspects of families that have children with special needs, as Lara and Pinos (2017) noted. As in López-Liria et al., (2020), an important aspect was the focus on learning how to work with the optimization of self-regulation and stress management by parents of children with special needs.

We can state that the hypothesis was proved and the research objectives were fulfilled in the course of the research. We should note that our study focused on the professional self-development of specialists, not students, which determines the scientific significance of this research. The practical use of the obtained results is possible in the activities of teachers who train sociometry specialists, as well as the work of Social Service Centres as a basis for professional self-development.

#### Limitations

Only social workers participated in the study without involving the representatives of other sociometry specialists. Besides, online interaction could limit the opportunities for coaching technologies in professional development.

## 6. Conclusions

The research is topical because of the focus on exploratory effective methods of professional self-development of sociometry specialists, insufficient coverage of problems in theoretical sources, the need for new approaches to preparing for work with families that have children with special needs.

It was established that the medium indicators of social workers' social competence dominate in working with families that have children with special needs. Cognitive and communicative-activity components are better developed, while motivational-value and reflective criteria of social competence are less developed. The developed coaching system demonstrated its effectiveness, which is confirmed by comparing the results of the control and experimental groups. The formative influence proved to be more effective in the development of cognitive and reflective criteria. Less significant changes were recorded in the motivational-value and communicative-activity criteria of social workers' social competence. The obtained results can be used as guidelines for further improvement of the developed system of professional coaching.

The obtained research results can be used for changes in the system of training and self-training of sociometry specialists. Experimental research data can also be used to optimize the strategy and tactics of professional coaching. Further prospects for scientific research are to study the impact of coaching on the self-development of not only social workers, but also other sociometry specialties.

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