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PROFESSIONAL SENSITIVITY IN THE WORK OF A PSYCHOLOGIST IN EDUCATIONAL SPHERE

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Abstract

The article raises the issue of developing a psychologist in the sphere of education. Emphasis is made on social and psychological conditions promoting the professional sensitivity of a psychologist, which determine the efficiency of their performance. This property is the level of sensitivity which allows detecting the subtlest indicators of a mental phenomenon. The structure of professional sensitivity is assumed to comprise four components: sensory properties (all types of sensitivity – from visual and auditory to olfactory); mnemonic properties (memory capacity, speed of memorizing, durability of memorizing, accuracy and speed of reproducing, ability for immediate reproduction at a certain moment); imaginative properties depending on the individual characteristics of imagination; and attention properties (selectivity, volume, steadiness, abilities to distribute and switch attention). Professional sensitivity is not static; it develops and its structure improves with professional advancement. The research showed that a training of sensitivity for psychologists in educational sphere sets conditions for forming higher levels of selectivity, concentration and switching of attention; for development of empathy, communicability, emotional stability, sensitivity, independence, and self-control. The research topicality is due to developing professional sensitivity necessary to fulfill the professional requirements to a psychologist in the sphere of education.

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1. Introduction

One of the major professional requirements to a psychologist in educational sphere is the readiness for social contacts, ability to analyze and solve interpersonal and intrapersonal contradictions. These requirements are difficult to meet without a well-developed professional sensitivity. Becoming a professional implies developing sensitivity as one of the most important professional qualities of a specialist. It is essential to research the social-psychological conditions of professional development of a psychologist in educational sphere.

Professional sensitivity of a psychologist is a specific subtle perceptivity of a specialist, providing the ability to register individual, even vague, features and indicators of a mental phenomenon. A specialist with high professional sensitivity not only more correctly recognizes messages (diagnostic function), but also better forecasts (prognostic function) the course of events. Shalaginova et al. (2019) wrote that without high professional sensitivity it is impossible to prevent bullying among schoolchildren. Sensitivity is a signal for mutual sympathy and becoming intimate between individuals (signal function). The area of our research is developing professional sensitivity of psychologists during sensitivity training. We suggest that to develop professional sensitivity of psychologists in the sphere of education it is necessary to master psychological techniques during a professional sensitivity training. If the identified conditions are observed, it is possible to increase the level of selectivity, concentration and switch of attention, develop empathy, sociability, emotional stability, sensitivity, independence, and self-control, highly demanded in the professional activity of a psychologist. In situations of professional choice and change of strategy, the high degree of sensitivity will allow a psychologist in an educational establishment to achieve the level of professional excellence (Rasskazova, 2016).

2. Problem Statement

The issue of training psychologists for education was transferred into the sphere of theoretical analysis rather long ago. Thus, the fundamental works dedicated to institutionalization of this profession and description of professional competences and personal qualities of such psychologists started to appear in the mid-2000s (Ashton & Roberts, 2006; Curtis et al., 2008).

Among contemporary researches one should highlight the works summarizing the practical experience of psychologists working in education in various geographical areas (Bowles, 2009; Corkum et al., 2007; Cottle et al., 2018; Ding et al., 2019).

Current researches study the stages of professional development of a specialist (Dolgova et al., 2016; Shcherbakova & Tikhodeev, 2017); identify the mechanisms and social-psychological conditions of positive/destructive development of a personality in profession (Tolochek & Zhuravleva, 2015); consider the professionally-significant qualities (Alyushin et al., 2015). The Russian experience of training psychologists in the sphere of education, including the fundamentals of psychological and professional development of personality of the would-be pedagogues-psychologists, shows that physiological and professional development of pedagogues-psychologists, especially at early stages, plays a decisive role in forming the bases for the society welfare. Researchers mark that high differentiation of personality qualities

and abilities of students determines the need to design individual psychological-pedagogical conditions for forming their competences (Khusainova et al., 2018).

Furthermore, in a psychologist's professional activity one should take into account the social and political realities, such as intercultural features and multicultural values at schools with a lot of migrants, for example, in Greece (Hatzichristou et al., 2019).

The conditions and prerequisites of developing professional consciousness in students are researched (Dolgova & Shayakhmetova, 2017; Ermolaeva & Lubovskiy, 2015). There are works researching the professionally significant qualities of a psychologist – sociability, communicability, emotional stability, tolerance (Sobkin et al., 2018). The necessary characteristics of a psychologist include communicability, stability and flexibility in relations, openness to new experience, taking personal responsibility, ability for empathy and (Znakov, 2017).

A number of authors insist on including the gnostic, communicative, motivational, practical, reflexive, and emotional components into the complex of personal qualities of pedagogues-psychologists. Within the emotional competence of a psychologist one may identify the following components: controlling and expressing emotions, including blocking negative emotional states; social communication skills; reflection, including self-motivation, and empathy (Valeeva & Khakimova, 2015). It should be noted that “emotional intellect” is the most frequent Western equivalent to the notion of professional sensitivity used in the Russian scientific literature. Considering the structure of emotional intellect, researchers define it as the ability to distinguish, control and use one's own and other people's emotions as a tool to manage thoughts and deeds (Mayer & Salovey, 1993).

It is worth highlighting the research (Lavreshkin, 2017) which analyzes the opportunities of group work in training format for preparing a psychologist in special spheres, as the practical part of the present study is associated with such training.

In the Russian education system, the position of a psychologist was introduced in 1988 by the Decree of the State Committee of the USSR on education. This was, first and foremost, the matter of comprehensive education, where a psychologist was to implement the tasks of studying a learner's personality and students' collectives, helping to overcome difficulties in studies, and creating conditions for correction-development support and overcoming crises at all stages of education.

As for psychological services in the system of higher education, this component should be considered a structural continuation of psychological support of learners in the system “school – university”. At university, a psychological service was to ensure optimal development and formation of a person, including professional development. Psychological Service is not a new phenomenon. The first Psychological Service in the Russian higher education system was formed at Kazan State University in 1977. A significant experience in rendering psychological assistance to students has been accumulated since then. Many leading Russian universities implement the practice of Psychological Services and consultations, including solving the problems of students occurring during professional education; the latter is a distinctive feature of a psychologist working in higher education. For example, at Penza State Technological University a welcome tour of the newly matriculated students includes “Acquaintance with a Psychological Service”; the students are told about the possibility to get psychological assistance and support in personal development. During an academic year, psychologists conduct active psychological and

pedagogical work with students: perform group sessions, social-psychological trainings, and individual consultations on overcoming psychological difficulties. Students may get psychological support in difficult situations; attend a psychologist's office for psycho-emotional relief and prophylaxis of stress in educational process. Psychological Service functions at Penza State Technological University since 2011, rendering professional psychological assistance to students, employees and teaching staff of the University free of charge. The Service personnel follow the principles of voluntariness, anonymity, and benevolence. The main forms of psychological support service functioning practiced at Penza State Technological University are: psychological consultations, psychological hotline, psychological trainings, game room, psycho-diagnostics. There is a room for psycho-emotional relief and a psychological club "Insight". A special area is psychological work with foreign students of Penza State Technological University. At Kazan National Research Technical University named after A. N. Tupolev, a full-fledged psychological service started to function since 2019, replacing online consultations. Students most often turn to a psychologist with such issues as: to continue the studies or not; whether the choice of a major was correct; relations with group mates, friends, partners, parents; problems loneliness.

The task of a university psychological service is to provide developmental character of education, i.e. to create pedagogical and psychological conditions for successful formation and development of a future specialist. At the stage when learners adapt to the educational process at university, to conditions and content of professional education, and master new social roles, a psychologist may help them find their place in a new collective, get used to the new place of study and, sometimes, living. At that stage, a significant role is played by diagnostics and further correction of learning and cognitive skills, development and strengthening of motivation, skills of time management, stress resistance and personal management in general, which can be developed in the course of sessions with a psychologist. The stage of intensification is more related to professional self-identification; it requires development of emotional and will sphere of a personality, correction of personal qualities and orientation towards revealing professional competences in compliance with the requirements of the chosen profession. The stage of identification requires a psychologist's assistance in developing a conscious comprehension of not only the functions and tasks of the profession, but also its ethical bases, and finalizes the formation of a mature personality and a specialist. To solve the tasks at each of the above stages, a psychologist must show him/herself as a highly qualified specialist and apply the whole range of qualities stipulated in the profession of a psychologist, including such a complex characteristic as professional sensitivity.

The research relevance is due to the contradiction between a demand for developing sensitivity of a psychologist and a lack of programs for effective formation of practical competences, first of all, in the process of professional development of a psychologist's personality at university, as well as during professional fulfillment.

The need to define the ways of developing professional sensitivity of a psychologist in the course of professional fulfillment determined the goal of this study.

3. Research Questions

The conceptual characteristics of sensitivity of a psychologist have just started to be identified in psychological research. We rely on the following components of the notion "professional sensitivity".

First, sensory properties. In various types of professional activities of a psychologist, all types of sensitivity can be applied – from visual and auditory to olfactory. Second, mnemonic properties. Memory underlies the formation of a person's individual experience. Successful professional activity depends on the memory capacity; the speed of memorizing; the durability of memorizing; the accuracy and speed of reproducing; the ability for immediate reproduction at a certain moment. A psychologist's professional activity mainly relies on running memory. Its functions are subordinate to the tasks of activity and are related to its content. Running memory uses a part of information stored in long-term memory. At the same time, it constantly transfers a part of new information to the long-term memory. Third, imaginative properties, which depend on the individual characteristics of imagination. In the work of a psychologist, very important are the processes of mentally building the images of objects and phenomena, which are not perceived directly. Finally, attention properties, which comprise the characteristics of attention: selectivity, volume, steadiness, abilities to distribute and switch attention. Selectivity of attention is associated with the ability to successfully tune to perceiving information. The attention volume is the number of simultaneously apprehended objects. The indicators of switching and steadiness of attention characterize the quality of performing actions under changing goals. Distribute of attention characterizes the efficiency of activity under simultaneous execution of several actions.

Professional sensitivity as a professionally significant quality cannot be considered as something univalently defined and unchangeable. As a professional role is mastered, professional sensitivity is developing, its structure is improving.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research objective was to identify the conditions of developing professional sensitivity of a psychologist. To achieve the set objective, the following tasks are to be completed:

1. Identifying the content of professional sensitivity of a psychologist.
2. Elaborating the program of social-psychological training of sensitivity for psychologists in the sphere of education.
3. Researching the efficiency of the program of developing sensitivity of a psychologist in the course of professional growth during training.

5. Research Methods

To solve the set tasks, we used a complex of complementary research methods: general scientific – theoretical analysis of pedagogical and psychological literature in the field of research; experimental methods (ascertaining experiment, forming experiment using the methods of active learning – social-psychological training, and control experiment); diagnostic methods (method for testing the level of empathy trends by I. M. Yusupov, method for diagnosing communicative social competence (CSC), methods for testing the selectivity, concentration and switching of attention); methods of mathematical statistics and data processing (descriptive statistics procedure, Pearson's chi-square test).

The experiment participants were the practicing psychologists of educational system – 16 members of Penza methodological association of practicing psychologists, who gave their consent for participating in the training and diagnostic procedures aimed at improving professional sensitivity. Meetings were

combined with sessions of the methodological association; trainings of professional sensitivity took place in additional five days.

In our research, the forming experiment had the following structure:

Stage I – preliminary diagnostics by polling the participants according to the selected techniques:

- research of selectivity of attention,
- research of concentration of attention,
- research of switching of attention,
- research of the level of empathy trends with the technique by I. M. Yusupov to determine the level of empathy of administration staff,
- diagnosing the level of communicative social competence (CSC) to determine the levels of communicability, emotional stability, sensitivity, independence, and self-control.

Stage II – forming experiment implying trainings with psychologists;

Stage III – post-diagnostics, when diagnostics according to the selected techniques was repeated;

Stage IV – analytical, consisting of comparing the results of two diagnostics.

In our opinion, important constituents of professional sensitivity of a psychologist are:

- high level of attention properties development (selectivity, concentration and switching of attention);
- developed empathy, influencing the emotional sensitivity and features of emotional reactions;
- high level of communicative competence, allowing easy establishment and maintenance of relations necessary in professional terms.

Having identified the constituents of professional sensitivity, we established the goals of sensitivity training – to develop the properties of attention, empathy, and communicative competence.

Psychological exercises which we used at our training sessions can be divided into two groups:

1. Exercises aimed at developing observer sensitivity. They develop the ability to detect and memorize a wide range of signals coming from other people. The lack or insufficiency of such abilities does not allow a psychologist to notice significant aspects in other people during communication.

Example: *All participants sit in a circle. “Now one person (we’ll choose one later) will go out of the room. Meanwhile we will divide into two groups by a certain quality which can be visually detected and unambiguously divide the group into two parts”. The two subgroups sit in separate places so that they are not mixed. The participant returning into the room has to identify the quality by which the group was divided.*

2. Exercises aimed developing the ability to comprehend states, properties, features and relations of people and groups. For psychologists it is especially important to be able to distinguish between what one sees and hears from what one thinks and feels.

Example: *The group is divided into pairs. “Now each of you will tell your partner five short episodes, some of them true, some false. The one who listens has to tell after each episode if it was true or not. When all five episodes are told, reverse your roles”.*

When the exercise is discussed, the participants identify the features which showed whether a story was true or not.

6. Findings

Diagnosis the selectivity, concentration and switching of attention showed rather poor results. Most of the respondents were characterized by middle and low values of all attention properties, which is an obstacle in professional activity. Comparing the results of diagnostics before and after sensitivity training demonstrates a positive shift in the level of each property. High selectivity of attention was detected in most of the respondents (10 people – 62.5%). The differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.81$ with table value $\chi^2_{cr} = 3.841$, $p \leq 0.05$). The comparison is shown in Table 01.

Table 01. Comparison of the levels of attention selectivity

Respondents	High	Middle	Low
Before training	6,2%	87,5%	6,2%
After training	62,5%	37,5%	-

Similar, although statistically insignificant, changes were detected for attention concentration: after the training 9 people (56.2%) showed a high level of this quality compared to three people before the training; a middle level was found in 7 people (43.7%) compared to 13.

The third property tested was switching of attention. After the training 12 psychologists (75.0%) compared to two (12.5%) before the training could easily switch their attention in professional activity. The differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.78$ with table value $\chi^2_{cr} = 3.841$, $p \leq 0.05$). We can also mark a significant reduction of the number of psychologists with a middle level of attention switching. The comparison is shown in Table 02.

Table 02. Comparison of the levels of attention switching

Respondents	High	Middle	Low
Before training	12,5%	75%	12,5%
After training	75%	25%	-

Research of the empathy trends level was carried out with the technique by I. M. Yusupov. Professional activity of a psychologist demands the ability to put oneself in the other person’s position and ability for voluntary emotional response to other people’s feelings. Developed empathy of a psychologist is a key factor of success in professional activity.

Positive changes are apparent if one compares the diagnostic results. The statistically significant differences were not revealed, but within the small sample the differences are noticeable. First, a number of psychologists with high level of empathy increased to 5 people (31.2%) compared to 1 person before the training. Such psychologists are sensitive to the needs and problems of other people, they are magnanimous

and sincerely interested in other people; they try to prevent conflicts and find compromises. Second, after the training there remained no specialists with low level of empathy. The comparison is shown in Table 03.

Table 03. Comparison of the levels of empathy trends before and after the sensitivity training

Respondents	High	Middle	Low
Before training	6,2%	87,5%	6,2%
After training	31,2%	68,7%	-

Using the technique “Diagnostics of communicative social competence” we found interesting the parameters of factors A (communicability), C (emotional stability), K (sensitivity), M (independence), and H (self-control).

According to the “communicability” and “emotional stability” parameters, we marked the same tendency of small but positive changes. After the training, the number of emotionally stable psychologists increased two-fold, of communicable – three-fold. Comparison by “communicability” and “emotional stability” parameters is shown in Table 04.

Table 04. Comparison by “communicability” and “emotional stability” parameters in the sample of psychologists

Respondents	Factor A Communicability			Factor C Emotional stability		
	High	Middle	Low	High	Middle	Low
Before training	12.5%	81.2%	6.2%	18.8%	62.5%	18.8%
After training	43.7%	56.3%	-	37.5%	56.3%	6.2%

The factor of sensitivity was highly estimated in only one psychologist before the training, while after the training there were 6 people (37.5%) with high level of sensitivity, manifesting artistic thinking and open to other people. The comparison is shown in Table 05.

Table 05. Comparison of the levels of sensitivity

Respondents	High	Middle	Low
Before training	6,2%	75%	18,8%
After training	37,5%	62,5%	-

Significant differences were observed concerning the factor of independence. After the training there were 9 psychologists (56.3%) with high level of independence, compared to two (12.5%) before the training. They are characterized by ability to make own independent decisions. The differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.92$ with table value $\chi^2_{cr} = 3.841$, $p \leq 0.05$). The comparison is shown in Table 06.

Table 06. Comparison of the levels of independence

Respondents	High	Middle	Low
Before training	12,5%	87,5%	-
After training	56,3%	43,7%	-

A high level of self-control was shown by 6 psychologists (37.5%) after the forming experiment, compared to one before the experiment. They are characterized as able to follow the rules and control oneself. The comparison is shown in Table 07.

Table 07. Comparison of the levels of self-control

Respondents	High	Middle	Low
Before training	6,2%	68,7%	25%
After training	37,5%	62,5%	-

While the number of psychologists with high level of self-control increased, the number of psychologists with low level of self-control decreased from four to zero. The differences are statistically insignificant.

7. Conclusion

There were positive changes in all chosen parameters after the training of sensitivity. Therefore, we can make the following conclusions:

- Among the structural and conceptual characteristics of professional sensitivity of a psychologist, one can distinguish the properties of cognitive process (attention) and personal characteristics: empathy, communicability, emotional stability, sensitivity, independence, and self-control.
- Mastering psychological techniques during a professional training of sensitivity promotes the development of the professional sensitivity of a psychologist.
- The following components of professional sensitivity appeared to change under the conditions of training sessions: selectivity, concentration and switching of attention and a personal trait of independence (statistically significant differences). Positive changes, significant for this sample only, were detected in the following parameters: empathy, communicability, emotional stability, sensitivity, and self-control (statistically insignificant differences).

The practical significance of this research is due to its enriching the scientific theoretical provisions with the description of social-psychological conditions for developing professional sensitivity in professional evolvement and advancement of a practicing psychologist.

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