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**THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL
COMPETENCIES USING THE ACTION RESEARCH**



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Abstract

The educators' preparation for the profession marks progress from cognitive knowledge being passed on to children to the professional model which includes also the significant social appeal in the emotional and conative field. The action research is one of the research strategies which enable to follow the competencies development. The main research question is: "How and in what aspects does personality development-based individual action research help the pedagogy students?". One year after the individual action research the students worked with personal and social development issues. The data and information collection methods include: the action research personal journal analyses of each individual student, four focus group records' analyses, the Scales of Psychological Wellbeing – based testing at the beginning and at the end of the action research and semi structured interviews. Based on the journal analyses (open coding) the issues such as fear of speaking in front of others, insecurity in interviewing clients, fear of new experiences, uncontrolled emotions in dealing with conflict situations and prevailing escape strategies when dealing with stress situations emerged. Behavioral techniques application brought about the most progress.

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1. Introduction

In professional texts focused on educators' action research we can come across the information that the action research facilitates and encourages the educators' development although it may primarily be focused on other areas than social personal development, it facilitates their development of social personal competencies (e.g. Mertler, 2006; Richterová & Kubičková, 2020; Richterová et al., 2020; Willis & Edwards, 2014). The project and research described in this paper deals with personal and social competencies primarily as a goal of the realization of the pedagogy students' individual action research (Červená, 2020; Hutýrová, 2020).

The key competencies development is among the prime goals of the teacher training programme. Achieving and reinforcing the theoretical basis of pedagogy and psychology disciplines should not only supplement the communication, personality and social competencies it should be given equal time and attention. The methods of lecture and explanation does not seem to be the most effective form for gaining these competencies, many authors think it is possible to gain them through experience, training, targeted communication development with other people (Lleó et al., 2017; Šauerová Švamberk, 2018).

The described project contains several features mentioned above which made a basic programme that the students participated in during the first year of their studies. The students then worked on their individual action research focused on their needs of personal and social development which they found during the programme and analysis of the collected data. The second year of the project realization is in progress with a new group of students.

The basic programme features were a week self-experience stay in the client's role in the therapeutic community for drug-addicts, participation in personality development groups, consultations with a psychologist both in the therapeutic community and at university or in the internship place, targeted interviews with close people and writing the action research journal.

The students reflected the experience of their personal and social situations from their daily life and the internship in the journal. The journal writing and the internship reflection provide the pedagogy worker access to the professional development and getting feedback from their internship (Kolář, 2013; Walker–Floyd, 2014).

The goal of this paper is to introduce the chosen research method, to clarify the students' work progress when carrying out individual action research. The narrowed research topics and examples of guidelines in individual action research phases will be introduced. The paper contains the benefits and limits of this research.

2. Problem Statement

The applicants for studies at pedagogy universities in the Czech Republic are not chosen by their personal qualifications but only by the knowledge tested during entrance exams (Šimoník, as cited in Lukášová, 2015; Průcha, 2002). This fact has been discussed a lot, though there have not been any significant changes in this field made in the process of accepting students to pedagogy faculties. It is very important to include psychotherapeutic elements or experiential work so – called experience therapies (Sekera, 2012, 2016) in teaching at pedagogy faculties not only for the above mentioned reason but also as a need of educators' communication development and interaction with students. These elements fit in the

educators training at universities for many reasons. They facilitate the students' personality development and their professional competencies (Sekera, 2012, 2016). The personality preparation is meant the enforcement of number of characteristics and skills that is e.g. communication, social creativity, healthy self-confidence, self-presentation etc. (Hupková, as cited in Chudý et al., 2011; Soják, 2017). Further development should continue during studies and in the course of personal and professional life. It is very important to look back in the past in the process of personality and professional development and find the features that led to personal growth and work with them efficiently (Nezvalová, 2000). It is appropriate to evaluate, verbalize, analyze the experience and put it into theory. It is not enough to evaluate it within yourself (Hupková & Petlák, 2004). One should ideally look back after each day and think about oneself. One should critically evaluate one's procedures and their efficiency. Self-reflection is very helpful here (Kalhous & Obst, 2009). The way which improves the ability of reflection and self-reflection is according to Nezvalová (2000) action research.

Action research helps to improve pedagogy practice. One of the goals of action research is to gain knowledge about a particular problem and tackle it efficiently (Janík, 2004; Richterová et al., 2020). The action research serves as a tool of personality and professional development which enables people to study real situations in a way that they understand and improves the quality of the solution. Pedagogy workers are enabled to grow through action research which facilitates their self-confidence in their work. Action research can contribute to enforcing the skills in the field of thinking and communication. It enables the educators to learn about themselves, their students and co-workers. The educators who were involved in the action research are more flexible in their thinking and are open to new ideas (Ferrance, 2000).

The research problem is possible to specify as finding the benefits in personality and social development of pedagogy faculty students who participated in personality development and individual action research realization (Richterová et al., 2020).

3. Research Questions

The goal of the research project is to find out by means of the qualitative analyses how and in what areas of professional development the realization of individual research helps students of pedagogy faculty. The research question of each individual action research of students was narrowed to chosen competencies and how the individual action research helps in development of personality and social competencies.

Four female students participated in the individual action research in 2019 and in 2020 other five female and one male student joined the research. This text will describe and analyse the individual action research from 2019 in detail.

The students went through several steps focused on personality and social development in summer semester. Particularly the following steps were taken:

- They completed entrance and exit tests *Scales of Psychological Wellbeing* (Ryff, 1989) and participated in one to two consultations with a psychologist in the project. In the second year the close people wrote a test to the student in order to improve the view of individual areas of mental comfort.

- They participated in four to five focus group meetings aimed at self-development which was video-recorded. Other students participated in the first year too but they did not carry out the research, they were interested though in involvement and work during the four meetings. In the second year only the students participating in the individual action research took part in the groups.
- They participated in a week self-experience internship in the role of clients in a therapeutic community for drug addicts in Bílá Voda.
- They wrote a detailed action research journal where in the first phase they noted the situations which they perceived as demanding or problematic. They analysed the texts by open coding method in March-April 2019. They chose two or three areas which proved to be significant based on the results of open coding and they worked on them in action research phases and cycles. Sometimes these areas were in harmony with the students' intuition in which they perceived the problem. In two cases the students were surprised by the outcomes of the open coding as they revealed the topics which they did not regard to be the key topics in their lives.
- In the course of action research they gained feedback by interview, in the second year also by psychological testing, e.g. Stress Profile or Life Satisfaction Questionnaire or by gaining feedback from the questionnaires filled by the therapeutic community clients and their close people.
- During the individual action research realization the students used personal consultations with the project manager both as for the action research methodology and conducting interviews in the area of personality and social development.
- The important data collection method was the analysis of professional texts in chosen problems in the personality and social competencies development.

The outcomes of this analysis together with the analysis of the present state of the students create the core for drawing up a “plan”, this would enable to look for new techniques, strategies and procedures in chosen personality and social topics of students.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to show the possibilities and benefits in order to include the individual action plan focused on the personality and social development into the pre-gradual preparation. It is important to deal with the limits of this research strategy too.

The individual action research realization focused on the educators' education mostly uses individual or participative action research in classes. The research aimed primarily at personality and social competencies development of pedagogy student programmes is very rare in the Czech environment.

5. Research Methods

There is a number of action research models. Action research mostly consists of four to six phases in which the observation is made. The action research model according to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), Seymour-Rolls and Hughes (1998) which consists of four phases was chosen to carry out the individual

action research focused on personality and social development. It was chosen for its simplicity and understandability on one hand and flexibility and usefulness on the other hand all with regard to the research topic. The important aspect is that this type of research makes it possible for the cycle to stop at any phase. Not every cycle has to necessarily end with the last that is the fourth phase (Willis & Edwards, 2014). Every action research model highlights the benefit of working in cycles as well as in a spiral. It is appropriate to go through the cycle several times and realize the continuous need for improvement and evaluation (in Willis & Edwards, 2014). Working in action research spirals was in the first year of the research limited by the summer semester 2019 which was set to carry out the research.

Individual action researches realized in this project were based on interpretative paradigm which influences research problem choice, data collection method and their analyses. It determines the interpretation of results and the way we work with outcomes. It is impossible to generalize the gained outcomes, they are valid only for the researched situation in the given context (Willis & Edwards, 2014).

5.1. Action research four-phase model

The first phase of the action research is marked as reflection. The information about the problematic area is being found in this phase. This phase also includes setting the wide research problem which gradually narrows. The researcher is in most cases the researched person at the same time, it is advised to involve other people's cooperation into the research, e.g. reflection gained from another person or other people etc. (Kolář, 2013; Willis & Edwards, 2014).

The second phase is marked as plan. The key part of this phase is exploring the ways of solving the problems and creating so-called developing plan. It arises by gained data and information analysis. Creating a plan or theory is a very important task of this phase as it will serve the innovative solution of the problem. The researcher should not take a theory over from someone who has created one before but take inspiration and apply it to their own needs (Richterová et al., 2020; Willis & Edwards, 2014).

The third phase is called action. This is when the application of the previously made plan or theory is made (Willis & Edwards, 2014).

The last phase is marked by its authors as observation. The change that happened is being observed, evaluated and reflected. Again data and information are collected. They may be qualitative (e.g. observation) or quantitative (e.g. questionnaire). Their quantitative interpretation without any generalizations is important in this case. The reflection makes it possible to describe the progress compared to the original state. Ideally the results found in one cycle should lead to starting a new cycle, where a new development plan is made and consequently it is applied and evaluated. The first changes are rarely sufficient, they should be gradually adjusted and improved (Willis & Edwards, 2014).

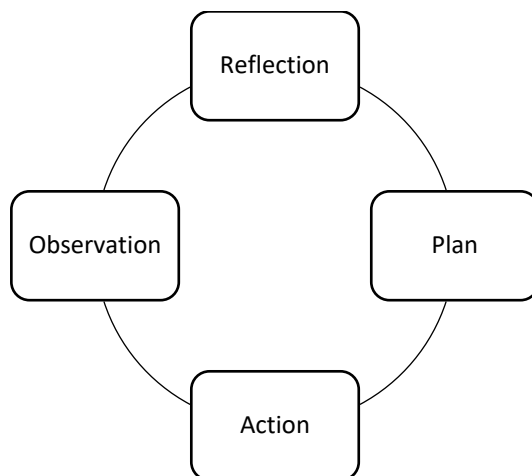


Figure 01. Comp. Willis & Edwards, 2014, s. 59

It is worth noticing that in figure 1 there are no arrows which would show in which direction the cycle should go. Cycle is flexible it enables moves forwards as well as backwards according to the researcher's needs. An example when this flexibility is appreciated is for example plan making when the researcher needs to find more information about the problem and therefore he can go back to the previous phase that is reflection and he does not need to end the cycle (Willis & Edwards, 2014; Richterová & Kubíčková, 2020).

5.2. Data collection methods and their analyses

In order to ensure validity and reliability several data collection methods were used in individual action research. So-called triangulation of data collection method was made. The main research method was personal action research journal. Erickson (1982) mentioned the appropriateness of noting down the experience with learning and changes, in which the author of the notes plays the main role. The term "personal action research journal" (PARJ) came to life during the research work of Walker-Floyd (2011). The author focused his work on his teaching practice and during writing down his notes he analysed professional experience, made a new theory which he applied in practice and consequently again evaluated. PARJ requires that the researchers test new theories, based on which they decide for new innovative processes in practice. Then they evaluate them from the point of view of usefulness (Willis & Edwards, 2014). The students used open coding and category making for the journal notes analyses.

The questionnaire Scales of Psychological Wellbeing was also an important research method. It is a standardized questionnaire made by Ryff (1989). The questionnaire consists of 42 questions which can be divided into 6 dimensions of mental wellbeing such as self-acceptance, positive relationships with surroundings, independence, purpose of life, skills in environment and personality growth (Ryff, 1989). The students filled in the questionnaire twice. Once when entering the project and once at the end of the individual action plan realization. The psychologist of the project evaluated the questionnaire and provided the students with feedback which they reflected in the PARJ.

Another method used by the students was a self-made questionnaire. All the four students set it up in order to get the feedback from the therapeutic community clients where they spent a week of self-experience internship. The questionnaires were constructed mainly using scale answers with the possibility

of free answers. The students focused the items on topics which they reflected in their personal action research journals. They gained feedback from the people who were not burdened by personal history and who had the possibility to be in close contact with the students mostly also in stress situations. Each student got feedback from 20 to 25 clients in therapeutic community. Simple statistics was used to analyse the data, with free answers categorization was used. The interpretations were qualitative and served as materials for further written reflections of students for the PARJ.

Another research method used in the research was an interview. Interview had mostly semi-structured characteristic and completed data gathering to given topics and research problems that the students worked with. Interviews were conducted with close people, schoolmates, workmates and therapeutic community clients. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed and analysed using open coding.

Focus groups is called a research method by which the researcher gains information which form the interactions in group. The data arose and developed freely during group debate about the given topic (Švaříček & Šed'ová, 2014). The focus group topics were chosen by the moderator (the first and the last focus group) or the topics were chosen by voting according to the needs of individual members of the group (the rest of the groups). The moderator made a video recording. All the students had the recording at hand and depending on the chosen research topic they transcribed parts of the focus groups and analysed by using the open coding.

The students described individual phases and cycles of the action research by narration. Narration is based on authenticity when each author chooses a different narration structure. Narrative story is a technique which takes over some tools from other scientific disciplines such as linguistics and its use of metaphor etc. (Švaříček & Šed'ová, 2014).

5.3. The people involved in the research

The researcher – each student was the researched person and the respondent at the same time. Their close people were involved too. They were interviewed and they filled the feedback questionnaires. Participation at the self-experience internship in therapeutic community was a very important part of the research. Clients from FIDES community were involved in the research. The clients filled the questionnaire voluntarily and enabled the students to make a semi-structured interview with them. The leader of the FIDES therapeutic community and chosen workers gave the students feedback. Other involved people were students of the first year of masters programme Social pedagogy, they participated in four realized focus groups with topic personality and social development. The SGS project manager was an important person of the research, she was giving written and spoken feedback throughout the research. The psychologist made not only the analysis of the standardized Scales of Psychological Wellbeing questionnaire but he also provided feedback which was reflected in the individual action research personal journal.

6. Findings

The main research question of the project finds out in which aspects and how the action research helps to tackle personality and social competencies of students.

The students participated in the programme which included several elements described above. Open coding of all the notes in personal journals took place half the semester through, each student chose three key topics based on the categories, she worked with them further on in the action research cycles.

The main project manager made the synthesis of chosen topics and categories a year after the project was carried out. Five topics were identified, the topics that the students worked with in the first year of the individual action research.

1. Improving the communication skills

Narrowed research problems were included in this topic, they were focused on problems of fear of speaking in front of people, the ability to communicate a negative feedback and improvement in conducting counselling interviews. All these topics were interconnected not only by students' personal need but also by the need to develop the pedagogy competence.

2. Self-value and self-trust strengthening

The most common problem in this topic was its narrowing so that it would be realistic to work with it within the limited time period of one semester. Mertler (2006) warns that when the topic is not narrowed it can be demotivating for the researchers and progress is traceable with difficulty. The narrowed topics included research problems focused on the need of safety, realizing one's strengths leading to strengthening self-value and defining the personal and professional boundaries.

3. Coping with demanding situation and working with escape tendencies.

The students defined two escape areas as of great importance, they came to light while analysing the personal journal notes. During the individual action research they decided to work with escape tendency strategies to crying and illness

4. Gaining the ability of adequate response in conflict situations.

The fourth topic proved to be common for all the involved students. Two of them chose the narrowed topic of working with emotions and constructive arguments for their work.

5. Diminishing fear when entering new situations and improving the adaptation process in new environment.

Last identified topic was connected with one student. The possibility of participating in the role of a client in a therapeutic community provided the opportunity to try new strategy in the phase of "Action".

In the first topic "Improving the communication skills" two students used the students' feedback, the feedback of the close people but also of the therapeutic community clients for the data collection, there they participated in the clients' role in the first stage of treatment. Professional literature helped them with the development plan creation. This kind of literature is very well accessible in the Czech environment. In the "Action" phase they used big palettes of cognitive-behavioral techniques and already after the realization of the first action research cycle they marked progress and improvement which was reflected also by their environment (e.g. Červená, 2020).

The students used the possibility of discussions in focus groups focused on personality development in the area of “Strengthening self-value and self-trust”. They gained valuable feedback again during their intensive week of self-experience internship in the therapeutic community for drug addicts. They could reflect their thoughts in personal action research journal. The narrow topic “Defining personal boundaries” and making clear the professional and personal boundaries the student noted in her journal that the most valuable finding is admitting that she has a problem in this area. She started reflecting situations and think about them. The analysis of the feedback from close people did not mark any visible changes in such a short time period. The progress was perceived on the personal level of client (analysis of personal notes in a journal).

Following the analysis of the notes in the personal journal two students realized their escape strategies in coping with demanding situations. One escaped into crying, the other into illness. In both cases the students worked using the analytical approach. They returned into situations where they experienced these strategies in the past and noted them down in the journal. The students distinguished different forms of crying. She realized she does not want to use the manipulating type of crying any more. Part of working in cycles was naming the situations in which she uses this kind of crying and its rejection based on understanding this strategy of behaviour. On the other hand the crying which is characteristic for the student and which complements her emotional experience she accepted as part of her personality and individuality. The student introduced the outcomes from this individual research in the presentation and defence of her master’s thesis (Hutyrová, 2020).

Two students analysed conflict situations and their coping. Both described their dissatisfaction with their own type of behaviour in these situations. The conflict did not make it possible for them to experience relief from tension but started depressive and melancholic states which they did not see end to. Following a detailed analysis both students used the Constructive Argument Theory according to Kratochvíl (2009) and tried to apply it in their practice. They involved their partners in the “action” phase and tested the constructive argument principle. One of them interconnected conflict situations coping with disturbing personal boundaries and her own self-respect.

The last topic was concerning perception of worsened adaptation in new environments and looking for its improvement. The valuable source of information was professional literature, the student created her developing plans and chose activities which she applied and reflected later (Eggrová, 2020).

7. Conclusion

In the end it is important to devote to the limits of the research strategy and individual action research focused primarily on personality and social development. One of the contributions and limits at the same time is the duality of the role of researcher and respondent. The student in the role of researcher thinks over the methods of data collection which will be the least burdened by one angle of view and will make it possible to explore the real reality. In the moment of qualitative analyse the personal experience of individual students and their view of the world come into the process. Although the analyses of interviews or tests reveal new facts, the student involves their view of the reality in qualitative analyses. On the other hand the motivation of the student to participate in the topic can be regarded a great contribution as it is the

topic which they perceive as important and problematic and they are interested in improvement in this area. The impossibility to see and perceive some things which remain hidden is the limit.

Although all the involved students tried to triangulate the data collection method and their analyses, this area needs to be marked as limited as well. The key method of the data collection was personal action research journal. Interviews with close people or clients in the therapeutic community enabled information completion for the phases “Reflection” and “Observation”. To note down unambiguous progress pre-tests and post-test would be needed. In the second year of the research the students used psychological tests much more. Only the next year after the post-tests application will show whether the tests are sensitive enough and whether they will mark progress in the narrowed research problem topics.

In the plan creation phase the analyses of expert texts about the narrowed topics proved to be the key step, on its basis the students were thinking about the innovative procedures offers in the “Action” phase. It was obvious that if the students had been able to consult this part more with experts, they would have appreciated it. The project provided only limited possibilities and consultations. After the “Action” phase in some cases it was provided to learn new strategies of behaviour or new techniques involvement into one’s own acting through e.g. participating in a training e.g. Constructive Argument Practice. The students did not have this possibility due to the time limits.

Out of five described topics which the students chose for their work within individual action research the topic focused on improving the communication skills in particular areas seemed to be “clearest” as for the used methodology and measurable contributions. The students appreciated working with escape strategies and defining one’s personal and professional boundaries the most. Otherwise they would not have the opportunity to work with these topics in pre-gradual preparation.

One of the most significant contributions of the realized research is very personal narrowing of the research on each student s’ topic. After one year realization we can see the need and interest of students to work on competencies improvement in the area of social and personality development. The curriculum of general study plans of individual education programmes gets quite new dimension of the education programme focused on the development of each students’ needs.

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