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**PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM: UPGRADING
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS, AT TEACHERS**

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Abstract

Nowadays, the need for broad horizons to a better understanding human development is increasingly more evident, for identifying those key points that could positively influence personal development and thus optimizing professional practice of teachers, meaning obtaining personal balance and professional optimization. By the present study is intended to present a track record after a semester working with teachers from pre-university system, high-school teachers enrolled in professional conversion program organized by the Faculty of Psychology and Human Social Sciences, of the University of Pitesti, Romania. Among the existent courses in the curricula's training program was also a personal development course named "the communication laboratory", a course which involved working with groups of teachers, for 2 hours per course, with weekly frequency. The work activity premises were centered on the specific bond existing between the person's inner world and his professional context of belonging, knowing that, most often, professional act is influenced by personal traits and dispositions. These study findings highlight the very positive results easily observable and assumed by the participants in this program, with direct effects at their personal balance and professional performance, drawing attention to the need to promote such programs of personal development with a deep psychologically specific. As a desideratum, these personal development programs should be implemented a large scale, offering to as many teachers from all educational systems, the opportunity to participate at such alternative learning activities.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this present paper is to present the results of a full-semester work with teachers enrolled in professional conversion program organized at the Department of Psychology of the University of Pitesti. Specifics conversion program which was developed over two years of study, consisted of the acquisition by students of additional professional competences in the field of psychology, graduating from these courses allowing them to expand their teaching courses with psychology ones. Curriculum was composed of a series of lectures, seminars and laboratories with psychological specific, in order to



provide the basis for continuing teaching activity in the field of psychology. As an added value brought to the curriculum program conversion, communication laboratory was added (also known as Personal Development Laboratory). Through this lab, students enrolled in professional conversion program had the opportunity to participate, during a semester, to personal development sessions with weekly frequency over a period of two hours.

Regarding the process of personal development, Laurentiu Mitrofan PhD. founding member of the School of Experiential Psychotherapy in Romania "SPER", says it is the "key to the dynamic and efficiency of an open society based on competition and creative aspirations, values centered on self-realization, personal and family welfare, moral stability and spiritual openness "(Mitrofan, 2007, p. 9).

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

According to the specific literature, the goals in personal development process converge on "developing existential coping strategies, personal resources activation, complementary or compensatory, so that individuals, groups or collectives (...) find their own solutions, using their potential available " (Mitrofan, 2008, p. 26).

The fundamental aims when creating work activities for the laboratory of communication were to offering a secure environment for having real opportunities in view of knowing, recognizing and developing personal potential, in order to optimize general functioning, at a personal and professional level. Communication Laboratory met all the requirements for its validation as a favorable framework for implementing, observing and highlighting the effects of this form of complementary education, as can be understood in this context, the process of personal development.

Students enrolled in the program were teachers with various educational specialties: math professors, Romanian, history, foreign language and geography teachers. Also, they came from different pre-university educational institutions in several Romanian cities, this being an important detail for the socio-cultural specific. There were a total of 30 teachers, men and women, which were within the age category of 40-55 years.

The general objectives of the development process were preserved regardless of the age of the participants, namely identifying and unlocking their personal and professional potential. However, in terms of working with adults, activity-specific work practice catches the nuances of working with this specific category due to their level of training and the specific professional area. Among the most challenging situations can be mentioned the "fighting pride" of a professional experienced adult, that can sometimes be seen in their attitude, considering themselves as being highly developed at a personal and professional level, showing less or no availability for activities of self-knowledge. On the other hand, another phenomenon often met in working with adults is the defense reaction against new situations, seen as a possible source of tension and frustration that can lead to passive-aggressive attitudes, choosing not to involve in specific self-development activities.

Therefore, the laboratory of communication aimed at creating a secure work environment, adapted to students specific, taking into consideration the theories of ages psychology, in order to increase the

emotional security of the participants, which were assumed to be fundamental for building authentic collaborative relationship and the desire to involve in the work activities proposed.

In this context, building a solid framework for increased uniformity and cohesion of the group, was necessary, following the premises that these elements can increase interest for integration and participation.

The entire work process was founded on a valuable statement saying that "the key for all the interventions that are subscribed to psychological counselling is to develop new existential coping strategies, activation of personal blocked resources, for the people involved in this process find their personal balance" (Mitrofan, & Nuță, 2009, p.3).

2.2. Research Methods

Communication Lab is among the learning activities that are part of the undergraduate curriculum in the field of psychology, at the Department of Psychology at the University of Pitesti. Although direct experience working with previous generations of students demonstrated the positive effects of communication activities, in the sense of self-knowledge and fostering optimal attitudes and skills, working with adults, that had with wide professional experience and stable personality traits, was an advantage but also a disadvantage for their abilities to adapt to fundamental new experiences as proposed in the developmental process.

Work techniques and methods specific for the process of personal development are "common to psychotherapy and psychological counseling (...) regardless of theoretical orientation of the therapist (...) structured in phases and therapeutic steps that are being grounded by the personality theories and by a certain philosophy of life, expressed in a specific therapeutic orientation"(Mitrofan, 2008, p. 16).

The proposed activities for the laboratory of communication were designed to accommodate the several specific coordinates of the group: the age category (adult), specific gender (men and women in relatively equal proportion), socio-cultural (areas of origin covering the whole country). Therefore, it can be said that developing the Communication laboratory was a real challenge, starting with construction of the work activities, and continuing to face all the unexpected reactions of the people involved, that can't be fully anticipated since this activity is a present-grounded and dynamic experience. The Communication laboratory proved to be a real source for personal and professional development for all those involved in the educational process.

An important observation was that the coordinator of the activities, although a specialist in psychology domain, did not show in any way professional superior to participants, the essence of the activities being precisely the "peer to peer" management of the class, alternating roles, the coordinator being a leader, a facilitator, a mediator, a learner, exposed himself to group dynamics. From this perspective, it is very important that the coordinator of a personal development and communication laboratory, has a wide experience in psychology field, which implies a significant number of personal development modules experienced for his own development. It's important to highlight the need for personal development process of the coordinator, for he can be able to play a genuine guide for other's self-knowledge process, to avoid work errors, knowing that there is a thin border between empathy and the lack of personal boundaries and defenses.

The process of personal development include a variety of „verbal and nonverbal expressive and creative techniques, having the methodological coordinates more rigorously developed" (Mitrofan, 2008, p. 17), unlike the psychological counseling that means addressing the individual personality at a superficial level, situational, strictly focused on a pressing life situations. In other words, the process of personal development is seen as closer to the depth of psychotherapy than to psychological counseling services. At the end of the sessions, techniques inspired from Frankl's logotherapy work methods were used. "Logotherapy is centered rather on the future, aiming for the meaning that the patient will give to his own future" (Frankl, 2010, p.110). As the author says, supporting the patient to be aware of the meaning of his own life, will help him find his motivation and personal balance.

The communication laboratory centered on personal development of the participants were sustained over two hours, with weekly frequency, over a number of 12 work sessions.

In creating the general framework of the sessions, were taken into account the steps that the participants are taking in such an experiential process, which are common and universally applicable to any process of personal development regardless of the therapeutic orientation of the facilitator (the coordinator). According to the literature, these phases are, in the order that they stand along the process: the exploration phase of the "personal map", the participant phase of confrontation the coherence between the internal map and external behaviors, the outsourcing step/direct expression of his experiences, the resignification phase or self-transformation by integrating the work experience.

Thus, all the sessions have been structured to allow participants to cross each fundamental step of this personal development process, the work themes being organized according the needs of the participants.

Thus, the first three labs centered on self-knowledge and knowing themselves as a group, one of the stated goals being to create together a non-formal setting in a formal context, an objective that triggered a series of reactions that leded to the astonishment participants, the retention to involve of some of them, the openness and exuberant feedback of others in front of inexperienced situations.

The working method involved exercises for self-knowledge, at the same time favoring the intercommunication of the participants, following the premise that "in a group therapy, especially in the early stages, rebutting the feelings of uniqueness (..) is a powerful source of relief" (Yalom, 2009, p. 34). In other words, in the first three work sessions centered on personal development, participants had the opportunity to discover that, often, what they believed to be a "unique" problem, often is found at the level of the other participants who reported living the same blockages, frustration or anxiety sources, which on the one hand reduced the anxiety level of the person concerned, on the other hand, increasing the cohesion and emotional support in the working group level. Also, the objective of the first three sessions was to establish a secure relationship between the coordinator and the participants, based on mutual trust and respect, empathy and emotional security. The literature indicates "therapeutic relationship" as a key factor in achieving success in the therapy process, regardless the specific of the therapist orientation or existential situation of the client/patient. Dynamic communication within the laboratory work was very close to the psychotherapeutic context, the reactions and personal acquisitions being equivalent to those which would be outlined in such specific context.

Of course, it is important to note that although the proposed activity was not having a declared psychotherapy specific, the phases constituting such a psychological process and the professional training of facilitator, helped undoubtedly getting some positive effects with psychotherapeutically meaning.

At this stage of self-awareness, one of the proposed exercise was in which each participant had to answer himself the question "Who am I?".

Apparently an easy question, in fact creating various feedback among participants. All these reactions, attitudes, feelings were write down by the coordinator and then discussed with each of them, inside the working group. Very likely, this question might be easy to answer for a person coming from a psychology field, but fort the participant at the self-development sessions, this challenge was indeed a significant one, directing the participants to discuss very personal aspects of their lives, otherwise not highlighted in the everyday life, not being a usual topic to talk about.

One of the objectives of this personal development laboratory, was to reconnect the participants with their personal world, the Self, in a life context that implies everyday cautions and individual involvement in external activities, providing few opportunities to connect to itself, to an authentic self-knowledge. Moreover, at this stage the participants were encouraged to express their empathy towards the others members of the group, for upgrading the group cohesion and positive interrelations. One of these activities was the role playing or working in pairs, helping them to learn how „to be present”, living here and now, being empathetic, creative, learning to listen not just hear what others have to say, learning to be patient, assertive and involved in his own life experience.

The following three labs were built on a series of activities with pronounced provocative specific, aiming to put the participants in the position to face their own internal contents (needs, frustrations, behaviors, expectations, attitudes) and expressing them, to analyze the overlap between internal believes and external manifestations. At this stage we used to work with metaphors, a specific technique PEU - unifying experiential psychology, psychotherapeutic guidance proposed and patented by PhD. professor Iolanda Mitrofan. Thus, the participants experienced playing with dough and free drawing. The coordinator noted the important details seen at each student during achieve tasks, which have been the subject of further discussions. For a holistic understanding of the experience, the feedback coming from every participant was put together with the notes taken by the coordinator, putting together all the verbal and nonverbal information, for better describing the unconscious message displayed during applied activities.

The next three sessions were focused on fostering communication, empathy and expression of the will, the ability to be objective about emotions, thoughts and personal behaviors. At this stage, the techniques used were based on movement exercises, these activities freeing the body and mind, favoring dynamism, optimism and involvement in activities. The participants worked both individually and in pairs. One of the exercises proposed implied that some of the participants seated in chairs and others had to make free movements on a song that could be heard in the background. The exercise was aimed at raising awareness of their own emotions and thoughts under the direct gaze of others. The team of "observers" had the task of "guessing" the thoughts and feelings of others staying in front of them. At the end of the exercise, we held discussion on shared experiences lived previously, the obtained feedback will be discussed in the conclusions section.

The next communication labs have had centered on reevaluating the entire work experience, in which each participant had the necessary time to formulate a genuine opinion in relation to what brought back all the experiences, for their own process of personal development. Each participant completed a self-analysis report after following these labs communication, to settle their experiences and to secure personal purchases, acquired in this learning environment.

The reason there were allocated three sessions to finish the series of communication and developmental laboratories, was to prepare the stage of "closing the circle" in a suitable manner, leaving that emotional secure context of the group and preparing for implementing the new acquisitions in external personal life context.

3. Results

Having the opportunity to work as a coordinator of this communication and personal development laboratory, being a PhD. at the department of Psychology, University of Pitesti, I had the chance to confirm once more that this developmental program can be considered a form of alternative education, with positive effects on the participants, proven to be on a short and longer term. Positive effects are to be understood primarily at an individual level, each participant offering amazing feedbacks about their own insights, summarized in the final report built at end of the process. To ensure secure framework and to foster the sincerity and authenticity of their responses, all participants were assured, since the start of laboratories, about the confidentiality of their identity and reported experiences. Also, to facilitate report writing, participants were assured that it will not, in any way, influence their grades, otherwise all being evaluated with maximum results in this laboratory. Actually, grades were not taken in discussion, being just a formality, given the educational context.

By communication laboratory oriented on personal development of the participants the aim was not to evaluate them in the classical way, this formative educational framework being thought of in a rather non-formal manner, to observe the effects an educational alternative program could have on their participation, interest and personal achieving of the participants, used to practice their activity in a classical educational system.

Another important aspect targets the participant's personal and professional development level, at the beginning of the developmental process. Although their age group ranged from 40-55 years, each having a professional experience of over 20 years, gained acquisitions along this laboratory were evident, meaning upgrading self-knowledge and reevaluation of their own perceptions about personal and professional current experience.

Over proposed activities, participants have gradually evolved, gaining new information about themselves, forming genuine relationships with people from their working group, as one of the participants suggestively sustained: "in fact, in this group we really do get to talk, we are not just sitting near or having small talks, it feels like somebody really listens and understands you. You know, this thing actually doesn't happen anymore, often people are physically in the same place, but mentally they are not. We don't get „emotionally connected" to each other, as we learned that it says ".

Although the stated purpose of the communication laboratory was to participate through the proposed activities, at developing new skills and abilities for the participants to optimize their

professional activity, this couldn't have been possible without taking into consideration the personal emotional development, preceding it. The techniques used centered on personal development did not address directly the existing situations in the professional (exercise class attitude, approach the student, etc.) assuming optimization services (through learning and connecting itself others in a secure emotional context) will entail significant changes in the professional approach context.

After the movement exercise, one of the participants said: "I do not know why but while I was moving, I was constantly thinking about how uncomfortable a student must feel, when standing up or called to the blackboard to answer the teacher's questions, so many eyes are turned towards him, the pressure is high. it's the first time I think about it and frankly, I am starting to think on a different approach for evaluating my students. My hands are still shaking, my heart was pounding during the movement exercise, for me it really was a powerful experience".

Another participant, following the exercise of modeling in dough, said "I've modeled a cube having firm sides and sharp corners, it seems a little stiff but, if you press your finger on it, it softens. But who dares approaching it when sees it so sharp? I think that's why students do not like me, apparently I am cold, I kept them all away. I realize now that this was not good for me, either".

Excerpts from the reports made by participants, are perhaps the most significant results of the experience of being a part of this personal developmental process.

"A unique, new experience, I went through all the sessions. I did not think that I can still learn something about me and my profession, after almost 30 years of work and many others of life". A.I. 52 years

"This lab taught me that I still have much to learn... About myself, about the others, about life... Thanks." G. G., 49 years

"After the first lab I began to be more interested on the psychology domain, I bought books, I started to think going to a therapist. Wasn't scary anymore. Is like I've slept for a long time and someone woke me, reminding me that life is more than work." L.O., 41 years

"Each session meant something to me, even if the time was short and there were times when I didn't get to talk. But even so, I have learned about myself through others experiences, here in the group and also at my workplace, regardless of their age or social status. I started to watch my students and colleagues in other light and that is really comforting." M. P. 44 years

"Everything I have worked at the laboratories of communication, helped me a lot, both personally and professionally. My colleagues at school asked me what's with the change, I told them about these laboratories and they got interested in participating too, but have nowhere to, so that's another reason for me to feel lucky for everything I have and everything I lived so far. For me, my group colleagues are not just colleagues anymore, some of them will remain my friends for life." O.L. 44 years

"What I find extraordinary is that even if I don't know exactly what and when something changed in the way I see and understand things, something did happen. After trying to answer the question "who am I?", I figured that it's time for me to start paying attention to other aspects of my life. Regarding my students, the relationship with them has improved. In addition, I began speaking to them about how important it is to discover yourself, learning to love, to appreciate and like themselves, they also begun being more interested to attend my classes... I forgotten how good it feels being connected with people around, this experience reminded me what I have to do to be good with me and the others." A.A. 40 years

4. Conclusions

The communication laboratory centered on personal development stands to be a resource and an important significant source for personal evolution, with direct implications at professional level. The specific psychotherapeutic inspired working techniques actively participate in fostering relationships with the Self and the others, streamlining communication through verbal and non-verbal approaches, increased sense of empathy, assertiveness, reflecting the identification, possession and use of personal achievements to an optimal level. The achievements on this process are both emotional and cognitive, with direct application in various individual contexts, such as personal, socio-relational and professional ones.

Besides, these qualitative leaps can be seen from one training session to another, being confirmed in the personal reports on the experience lived in such a program, of the participants.

The importance of an educational program focused on personal development is supported by studies both at a nationally (mainly at school SPER) and internationally level: Google Inc. anticipating the needs of dynamic evolution of the individuals, launched in 2009 a new training program for supporting emotional needs of the employees: School of Personal Growth, through which the spiritual and cognitive development of students was possible.

Besides, personal development brings together the two often considered incongruous levels, the emotional and the cognitive ones, considering the simultaneous optimization of these is of great interest for human development, helping the person to achieve and maintain his personal balance, in a world increasingly unbalanced.

Through this personal development program, the participants are capable to realize their own blockages, getting conscious about their potential and finding solutions for surpassing obstacles and upgrade themselves to a higher level of understanding the internal and external world, aiming for existential balance. From a systemic point of view, changing itself will lead to significant changes in own social and professional level, the personal development program is a valid method for obtaining positive personal change for Self-optimization.

This present article sustains the implementation of such educational and formative program in educational institutions, to facilitate access to a new educational paradigm, with proven benefits on a personal and professional level, considering the teacher is playing a particularly important role in becoming of a person, so that he himself should represent a model of balance, personal and professional maturity and development.

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