

Active learning and self-reflection as tools to self-construction of professional identity among future school counsellors

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ABSTRACT: *In the article we discuss the use of active learning and self-reflection in a small group studying to become school-counsellors. We presumed that active student involvement in the process of learning and reflection about themes, lectures, articles, and presentations would help them in their future work with children. The article presents the learning process, constructed as workshops with the use of various (prescribed) activities, in-depth discussion and written self-reflections; these aim at enabling students to better remember the subject matter, to become aware of inner prejudices, to broaden their future professional skills and to build empathy for children's problems. Qualitative analysis of written self-reflections of eight students, attending the subject Educational Approaches and Strategies, in the study year 2020/21, was made. Students really liked active learning and changes in writing self-reflections throughout the process were observed.*

KEYWORDS: *Education, self-reflection, future school-counsellors, teaching techniques, transformation*

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I. INTRODUCTION

History has taught us that knowledge without human values can be potentially dangerous. Today's pluralism exposes us to the difficult task of which values to choose for students when several value systems coexist. Transmission of knowledge does not alone help students; they need to construct their understanding of the world by themselves. The teacher must carefully create teaching situations where students can learn about chosen themes through various activities, while simultaneously reflecting on the experiences and expressing their perceptions. By doing so, they become aware of how their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors can impact future (professional) choices and actions.

II. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the research was to teach students to reflect on their thinking process during seminars conducted as workshops with many specified activities (acquaintance game, activities including silence or relaxation, storytelling, positive sayings, group singing or music, group work and extra physical activity) focusing on the seminar keywords. Hand- or computer-written self-reflections were used to examine these four elements: a) approval of such work, b) feelings and thoughts during the activity and c) whether and d) how students' self-reflective writing changed over one semester. Regular practice of oral reflection was not included in this study. We assumed students' written assignments about workshop activities would be interesting for them and help them better remember the subject matter, create awareness of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors aimed at becoming better future school-counsellors and to improving their capacity to write qualitative self-reflection.

Our study is based on the qualitative descriptive method of empirical pedagogical research. Data was collected using the method of written self-reflections. Written instructions were presented in advance. Reflections were collected in the 2nd semester (from March to the end of May) in 2020/21, during seminars on the subject Educational Approaches and Strategies. Because of the COVID-19 situation and the restriction of public life in Slovenia, all lessons were online, using MS Teams. At our first meeting, basic instructions were given and assessment criteria for the homework and presentation were explained. Presentation titles were chosen by the students themselves. At the second meeting, the relevant topics were presented by the professor to show students what was expected. At the third meeting, self-reflection criteria were introduced, and examples were given, including suitable literature. In the following weeks, students gave individual presentations. The activities were prescribed through which students would present the term paper (as a workshop). For homework, students would write self-reflections. After each term paper presentation, students had six days to submit their self-reflection to the online classroom. We offered a variety of assignments and methods to promote self-reflection. These included a drawing of the value circle (present condition and future wishes), ten written reflection papers (approximately

half a page in length), the possibility of taking a photo of the associated word. Since participants provided responses in Slovenian, data analysis was conducted before translation into English for this article. Each student could skip no more than three self-reflections. If skipping more than three, they needed to do extra work at the end of the course. Writing self-reflections was mandatory, but not graded. The extent of reflection was not determined. One student had difficulty attending class regularly, because of overlap among tutorials. Three students had difficulty writing self-reflections toward the end of the semester for a variety of reasons. Two students had to do extra work at the end of the semester.

III. DISCUSSION

Professionals should be able to understand and interpret their ideas and their reactions and actions, while receiving and incorporating feedback to maintain professionalism in practice. Rupnik Vec (2006) says mental models or beliefs (such as teacher's views, knowledge, experiences, expectations, and judgments) are subjectively and culturally determined and can thus affect interpretation of events. When our beliefs, shaped by our own social, political, or cultural experiences, are left unexamined, they can become a rigid mind-set that influences the whole teaching process (Gillis & Mitton-Kükner, 2019; Korthagen, 2014; Oskineegish, 2019). Self-reflection is the key factor in changing the interpretation of actions in professional situations and is needed for permanent professional development and growth that includes changes in practice (Rupnik Vec et al., 2020). Changing beliefs is difficult, since these connect with the inner (subconscious) layers of the mind (listed from external to internal); a) skills: methods and techniques of doing; b) competences: broader abilities; c) concepts: mental models and beliefs; d) professional identity and e) authentic personality (Korthagen, 2014). Students - future (teachers and) school-counsellors - must be trained to practice the ability to analyze values situationally, because internal perceptions represent the lens through which they see the world around them and build their teaching practice.

The concept of self-reflection is an ancient practice, exemplified by Socratic dialogue (Tancig, 1994; Horvat, 2011). In philosophy, self-reflection means personal self-awareness, self-consideration, or self-understanding. It is also interpreted as critical consideration of (one's own or national) actions and behaviour (SSKJ, 2015). Activities to promote (self-)reflection are being incorporated into many professions, as for example, health professions like clinical psychology and nursing (Cooper & Wieckowski, 2017, Dubé & Ducharme, 2015), educational practice (Nelson & Sadler, 2012; Tay & Jain, 2019; Schön, 1983; Oskineegish, 2019; Brookfield, 1995), social work (Toros & LaSala, 2019; Mulder & Dull, 2014; Fook, 2006), engineering (Chenette et al. 2016), architecture, law, management (Wang et al., 2020; Živčicová & Gullerová, 2017). Self-reflection is based on a range of functions, but introspection and meta-cognition (Farthing, 1992) represent its foundations. Metacognition is the process of "thinking about thinking" or reflecting on personal habits, knowledge, and approaches to learning. It means distancing oneself from one's interpretations. Introspection is an intentional, systematic process of self-questioning and self-discovery of values, which occurs on the surface when it involves thinking about one's behavior and that of others, and in depth when it refers to thinking about one's motives, values, feelings, and beliefs (Rupnik et al., 2020). It allows a person to realize that his or her perception is an interpretation, an explanation filtered by existing beliefs, expectations and desires from our experience and current emotional state. Desjarlais & Smith (2011) distinguish between self-reflection and self-assessment; whereas self-reflection means the process of deepening one's self-understanding and can lead to significant discoveries or insights, self-assessment means a process used for studying one's performance to improve it and involves establishing strengths, improvements, and insights based on predetermined performance and criteria. Alternatively, we can simply call it a difference between meaning-oriented and action-oriented reflection (Hoekstra, 2007). Regardless of this distinction, in the article self-reflection covers both meanings. Practicing self-reflection requires discipline and an intention to practice focused attention, honesty, and willingness to learn, change and grow and a feeling of safety in this inquiry (Gillis & Mitton-Kükner, 2019). Some insights can be achieved in the moment, but consistent learning requires scheduled time for reflection.

Self-reflection is mainly associated with a cognitive process. For developing and improving teachers' professional practice, self-reflection, as intentional and methodical reflection on one's praxis, is recognized as a valuable method (Schön, 1983; Gillis & Mitton-Kükner, 2019; Korthagen, 2014) for transforming values, cognitive maps, or normative schemas (Cooper & Wieckowski, 2017). Critical self-reflection can stimulate the search for new perspectives and solutions, further developing practitioner's strengths and abilities (Desjarlais & Smith, 2011). Prerequisites for the systematic promotion and monitoring of self-reflection are as follows: a) a clear idea of what self-reflection is; b) knowledge of how it transpires and of c) which teaching strategies help in its implementation and d) how students' progress in this field can be monitored. An individual is more likely to complete a task if its purpose is clear; it is therefore important to review the background of reflective practice, its use, and benefits before initiating the exercise (Schön, 1983). Being mindful of the goal raises awareness of the thinking process and the situation, which can help to change beliefs. Reinforcing the structure with examples of what to reflect on is recommended (Gibbs, 1988; Desjarlais & Smith, 2011), along with providing guidelines for completion of the reflective practice. Brookfield (1995) cites six reasons for practicing critical reflection.

According to him, self-reflection enables an individual a) to take informed action; b) to clarify and justify effective action to him/her-self and others, c) to achieve conscious, systematic development in his/her work philosophy; d) to eliminate self-blame and e) feelings of incompetence, owing to a clear understanding of responsibility for the experiences and actions of all involved and f) to regulate emotions by becoming aware of emotions (assumptions about these, their functionality, etc.).

Toros & LaSala (2019) categorize the meaning of reflective practice as follows: a) self-analysis: a tool, making meaning, self-understanding, feelings and thoughts, values, b) feedback from others: peer-based professional feedback, client-based feedback, c) negative self-appraisal: personal weaknesses and mistakes, self-criticism, comparing weaknesses and resources/strengths and d) motivation for improving self-reflection: effectiveness, hope/motivation for personal growth, learning from mistakes, supervision, continuous professional education. Generally, when a professional becomes a reflective practitioner, he goes beyond thinking about the content, techniques and methods of his work and directs his attention primarily to his own system of beliefs and values that influence his professional activity as counsellor, teacher, or leader (Brookfield, 1995). The personal level involves the ability to witness and evaluate our own cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes, while the professional level is often connected to developing skills. As such, it is an important part of self-evaluation and feedback (Rupnik Vec, 2006), but it should not turn into (self) criticism (Toros & LaSala, 2019), because negative self-evaluation can cloud professional judgement and analytical abilities (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Support from peers during new learning, the development of various reflexive skills such as self-awareness, openness to others and their practice, critical thinking and changes to certain professional practices are important but must acknowledge the culture of the environment where it is implemented (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015). Changing beliefs, however, is a lengthy process.

It has been noted that reflective practice is effectively learned within a small group setting (Knight et al., 2010). Solving a variety of problems requires complex thinking, using different teaching methods, being narrative, written, or mixed (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015). Verbal strategies are as follows: reflective sessions, focus groups, active learning groups, debate, mutual critical friendship, and mutual peer visits, action research (Ross & Bruce, 2007), and structured supervision promoting safety and trust (Cooper & Wietkiowski, 2017). Written strategies are as follows: diary writing as the most convenient tool for reflection that serves several purposes (Rupnik Vec, 2006). By writing about daily tension, frustration, conflict, critical events, and problems we get potential material for raising awareness and further exploring the relation between events, and patterns of behavior that emerge over time. There are also reflective journals, essay writing, analysis and evaluation of articles, research, and portfolio design (Sentočnik, 1999). These processes are also interconnected; critical friendships or diary writing can be an integral part of portfolio design or action research. Reflective post-meeting records are an integral part of supervision. Activities that presuppose the participation of an external expert ensure an intensive process of change and professional growth of the individual and/or organization (Rupnik Vec, 2006). A combination of verbal and written reflective practice strategies is essential for positive outcomes, although verbal strategies are more appreciated than written ones by nurses (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015), because the latter requires an investment of time.

Training activities with coaching and feedback helping to prepare for the development of reflective skills. Coaching (Basile, Olson & Nathenson-Mejia, 2003) means the systematic guidance of a person in a professional field, somewhere on the continuum between reflection and teaching. Anseel et al. (2009) have demonstrated that feedback combined with self-reflection will yield stronger results than feedback alone. In Slovenia the importance of formative monitoring of student progress is increasingly emphasized (Rupnik Vec et al., 2020). This is defined as a dynamic process that requires the professor to adapt to student understanding and pace of progress. Constructive feedback is a key element in formative monitoring and must extend broadly to reflect on the experience after each activity and compare achievement with the desired state, with theory, and with personal progress. Practitioners often need the opportunity to practice supervision, to become more self-reflective (Kobolt & Žorga, 2013).

IV. FINDINGS

Demographic information: The research is based on the non-random sample of 8 female students, future school-counsellors, who, after each seminar exercise for the subject Educational Approaches and Strategies, wrote self-reflections on the topic. These self-reflections were not part of the grade. All students were asked for permission to use the reflections for research purposes; they all consented and made additional copies of the self-reflections. We did not influence the answers in any way. Students were also assured that their identities as respondents would be kept confidential. All collected self-reflections of an individual student were marked with the letter P (participant) and a serial number. Later we numbered the reflections (e. g., P1-3). The data were manually coded and analyzed using the principles of content analysis, consisting of unitizing, categorizing and pattern searching (Padgett, 2008).

Participant/ Themes of the self-reflection	*P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
T1 – Professors' presentation on positive psychology	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
T2 – A lecture given by a counsellor on his practice in the Czech Republic and their educational system	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	yes	yes
T3 – The importance of art in education	yes	yes	yes	x	yes	yes	x	x
T4 – Forest pedagogy	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	x	x
T5 – Storytelling	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	x	yes
T6 – Relaxation, mindfulness, visualization, and quiet time in education	yes	yes	yes	x	yes	x	yes	yes
T7 – A lecture given by a woman from HOSPIC about mourning of children	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
T8 - Personality and self-esteem	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	x	x
T9 - The importance of positive thoughts, affirmations, and approval in raising children	x	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	x	x
T10 - The importance of sport in education	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	x	x
T11 - The importance of music in education	x	yes	yes	yes	yes	x	x	x
Total number of written self-reflections	9	11	11	9	11	3	4	5

Table 1. Lesson titles and general data on student reflections

Based on the Gibbs (1988) stages of reflectiveness (description of gained information or situation, labelling thinking and feelings in this situation, evaluation, and analysis, conclusions about the experiences and further action plans that can be applied to an individual or community), the self-reflections were evaluated. Self-reflections were coded for themes, terms, phrases, and patterns that were repeatedly identified. From these codes, we developed three categories: a) approval of the active seminar tutorials, b) awareness of feelings and thoughts during presentations, and c) whether and how students' self-reflective writing changed over the semester. As we can see in Table 2, some students wrote many examples, described in detail; others wrote shorter self-reflections. The length of the self-reflection was not prescribed.

Themes	What are you reflecting on?	What were you thinking?	How did you feel?	What went well?	What could have been done better?	What sense did you make?	What have you learned?	How would you apply gained knowledge?	*P	Σ	x ⁻
T1	16	6	4	0	0	5	1	1	8	33	4.13
T2	37	23	11	26	0	14	11	1	7	123	17.57
T3	16	6	8	17	0	2	2	0	5	51	10.20
T4	16	9	2	17	0	8	12	3	5	67	13.40
T5	20	7	8	15	0	8	10	4	6	72	12.00
T6	18	6	3	14	0	3	8	3	6	55	9.17
T7	29	15	3	14	1	12	47	16	8	137	17.13
T8	20	8	6	16	0	2	7	9	5	68	13.60
T9	23	7	5	9	0	2	3	2	4	51	12.75
T10	25	11	4	10	1	5	8	4	5	68	13.60
T11	19	7	3	11	0	2	4	2	4	48	12.00

Table 2. The frequency of written answers

*P-Participants

The appeal of active learning

It turned out that the students liked the implementation of seminar exercises as workshops. In writing, they used phrases such as “I like the presentation, activity, it was interesting.” Here are some examples: “It was very good, genuine, simple, relaxed, and lively” (T2, P7); “I had so much fun” (T3, P3); “I would especially highlight the activity where we got to know the art of music and dance through opera and ballet and modern expressive dance. The latter left an extremely strong impression on me. I spent the whole day thinking about it, about its strong message” (T3, P5); “Innovative, we all participated” (T4, P4); “The presentation was very good. I learned many new things, but I will most remember how the boy climbed a tree in the video; we would certainly not allow that in school” (T4, P2); “Difficult topics were approached in an interesting way, useful, vivid, updated to the current time of the epidemic” (T7, P5); “The activities were nicely tied to the material, although there were already many presentations, the activities were not repeated” (T8, P3); “The presentation encouraged us all to work together” (T8, P4). In the conversation, they repeatedly mentioned how they remembered the content better through the varied activities.

Awareness of one's feelings and thoughts

Well-developed social and emotional competences are an important protective factor for young people and are positively associated with school performance and the reduction of some negative aspects of mental health (Priročnik, 2019). They relate to several areas, one of which is self-awareness: awareness of the student's own thoughts, emotions and values and their connection with behavior. Thus, we were interested in how much awareness students had of their emotions and thoughts during the presentations. They wrote, for example, "While watching, I thought about my relationships, how I get along with people. I recognize myself more as an introverted person. That doesn't mean I don't like hanging out, but that I might be more careful about who I hang out with" (T1, P3). "A song from a classmate reminded me of the sea. I can't wait to go to the sea" (T11, P4). Most examples of their feelings were written about the themes: A lecture about practice in the Czech Republic (T2), The importance of art (T3) and Storytelling: "I found that I preferred a narrated story to reading from a book. It is much more authentic" (T5, P2). Most examples of their thoughts were written about the themes: A lecture about practice in the Czech Republic (T2), A lecture about mourning of children (T7), The importance of sport: "I was a bit worried about whether I covered the essentials in the seminar paper, whether the activities were appropriate, related to the theory, and how classmates and professors would react" (T10, P3). "Quotes that my classmate chose gave me more faith that I would succeed in my studies" (T10, P4). Forest pedagogy: "I was surprised when I saw how these kindergartens actually work" (T4, P3). We observed that towards the end of the seminars, students were writing more precisely about their feelings and thoughts. They reflected on how their thoughts and feelings influence their behavior.

Changes in written self-reflections

The easiest question for students was "What are you reflecting on?" Mostly they wrote fluently and at length. They also knew how to praise their classmates and were satisfied with the presentations. On the questions "What sense did you make?" and "What have you learned?" they wrote similar answers, mostly data about the activities and gained knowledge, as expected. On the question "How would you apply gained knowledge in practice?" we found a shift in thinking from "being a student" to "being a future school counsellor": "An exercise minute to move was funny at first but is effective and I will use it in the future" (T1, P1). "When I have children, I definitely wish to read them a lot of fairy tales" (T5, P2). "As counsellors, we need to be aware of the importance of concentration that can be achieved through the various interesting methods we have come to know, like vigilance, self-knowledge" (T6, P5). "I think it is important to talk to children about self-esteem, identify children with low self-esteem and help them replace negative thinking with positive" (T8, P5). "If we make an effort, we can find many interesting didactic games" (T11, P2).

V. CONCLUSION

The basic goal of professional learning is re-thinking existing attitudes and values that influence the school-counsellor (and teacher) as a professional. Self-reflection can be useful in teaching both specific content and an approach to learning and thinking, consistent with the framing Grossman (2009) provides. In the article we presumed that active student involvement in the process of learning and reflection about themes, lectures, articles, and presentations would help them in their future work with children, giving them ideas on working with children, developing their empathy and prosocial behavior. It can also be a useful tool for formative assessment of students professional development. In our study future school-counsellors students appreciated the process of active learning, and changes in written self-reflections were observed throughout the process.

Although we also discussed the students' experiences, this study relies on written self-reflections alone. This certainly cannot capture the entirety of a student's experience. By only rationally counting student responses in each category, we often focused on the students' capacity to practice reflection instead of measuring qualitative changes in student understanding (Creswell's, 2007). Some students have better language skills, while others are limited by their language expression, although their self-reflection was precise. However, not enough prior training was offered to students during their reflection process, to guide them or to ensure that they had the skills needed to implement the reflexive process. It was assumed that they intuitively possessed these skills and were familiar with reflective thinking. In the future, self-reflection could be used as part of formative assessment of students, of course with prior systematic teaching of writing them.

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