



Implementation of the DPA approach in an intercultural context on the example of the ACTTE project

Abstract: Due to the emergence of new social problems resulting from weakening pro-integration moods regarding culturally, ethnically, or religiously diverse societies, the Acting in Context by Training the Trainers in Social Empowerment (ACTTE) project was prepared and implemented. The Polish National Agency of Academic Exchange (NAWA) financed the project as part of the International Academic Partnerships program. The project goals were: 1) shaping competencies/skills in the field of DPA (Developing the Power to Act) in organized training participants (NGO employees and academic teachers), 2) developing tools for intervention work based on the concept of Empowerment. Within the training, the research was carried out based on the action research methodology and the use of scaling and uncategorized interview. The article presents the excerpt of the research, which was aimed at determining the changes in the competencies related to the use of the DPA approach in the project's participants, as well as their subjective understanding of the DPA. The presented research results show the legitimacy of the project implementation by partner institutions, which are universities and non-governmental organizations. The competences and skills acquired by the project participants can be used in academic and environmental work.

Keywords: training, intervention, social problems, Empowerment, interculturalism

Introduction

The contemporary world is constantly transforming, and its distinctive feature is multiculturalism. For many years, pro-integration moods prevailed in Europe regarding culturally, ethnically, or religiously diverse societies. Still,

the following years brought significant changes in attitudes towards multiculturalism. The change in the perception of the Other/Stranger could have been the result of the intensification of terrorism, an uncontrolled wave of refugees and emigrants (Lewowicki, 2017, p. 19), and ultimately – the ongoing war in Ukraine. These negative tendencies have recently become visible in Poland, but other European societies are not free from them either. This seems disturbing, considering that all of Europe constitutes a mixture of different nationalities and cultures.

The literature analysis and numerous studies confirm that the acceptance of multiculturalism enhances the integration of diverse societies (Cabiati and Raineri, 2016; Gee et al., 2009). Multiculturalism serves new forms of the desired social cohesion, which is a necessary condition for economic growth and social development in the requirements of the post-modern economy (Sadowski, 2016, p. 79). The post-pandemic reality and the military conflict in Ukraine have shown that Europe should consolidate. Therefore, intercultural education, both formal and non-formal, becomes essential. In the latter, the citizens, gathered around non-governmental organizations, play an important role. In many environments, foundations and associations play the role of leaders in undertaking activities in the field of intercultural education. This education is crucial in shaping intercultural coexistence skills, especially in the conditions in which entire groups become pauperized.

The social assistance and social work system, both in Poland and the entire European Union, is facing new challenges related to the emergence of problems, such as increasing socio-economic inequalities or intensified migration processes and the insufficient effectiveness of interventions undertaken in this area. The Acting in Context by Training the Trainers in Social Empowerment (ACTTE) project was prepared and implemented to meet these problems and the expectations of various environments. The Polish National Agency of Academic Exchange (NAWA) financed the project as part of the International Academic Partnerships program. The project responded to the current social needs in Poland and the EU countries. It was also consistent with the current model of social work, assuming the active participation of people receiving support in overcoming their difficulties (Laging and Heidenreich, 2019; Tanner et al., 2017).

The ACTTE project was carried out by a consortium of 4 universities and 4 NGOs from Poland, France, Spain, Italy, and Belgium. The main goals of the project were: (1) creating tools for intervention work (a toolbox) based on the concept of Empowerment for employees of non-governmental orga-

nizations (NGOs) working with marginalized and socially excluded people and academic teachers educating future educators and social workers, (2) developing competencies/skills in DPA (Developing the Power to Act) – an approach using the concept of Empowerment in people participating in training (both NGO employees and academic teachers).

The DPA approach is based on the observation that over many decades of social work, there has often been a lack of productivity, which makes the social workers tend to develop a sense of professional helplessness. At the same time, the assisted people are often blocked and remain frozen in the sense of helplessness, in which any possibility of change is unattainable in their eyes (Le Bossé, 2016). In line with the DPA approach, Empowerment is the cornerstone of the psychological process in which motivational action is a crucial issue, and the intervention should be tailored to individuals and the context of their lives. DPA is “a process by which people, together or separately, gain a greater opportunity to act on what is important to themselves, their relatives, or the group they identify with” (Le Bossé, 2016). In this approach, the first step is to recognize the problem here and now because the here and now is the only place to act. There is no possibility of acting in the future or the past. It is impossible to rebuild the past or project the future onto the present. Thus, one of the most critical aspects of this approach is that it is an imperative to be rooted in here and now. The second necessary step is identifying the conditions required to turn the action into success. To do this, it is essential to recognize the relevant conditions and make a change in the immediate surroundings (Rappaport, 1984). With this approach, it is possible to reverse the destruction and translate it into a personal or collective construction process.

The DPA approach is focused on four axes that formed the basis for the training provided in the ACTTE project: 1) Identifying people involved in the problem; 2) Involvement of interested people in defining problems and solutions; 3) Taking into account the context when conducting the intervention; 4) Introducing the awareness-raising approach. The overriding goal of the training was to shape the “train the trainers” competencies among the participants. Each workshop was organized in a different partner country (Spain, Italy, Belgium) and lasted four days. There were five workshops in the project – two online (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and three face-to-face trainings. To show the participants the sociocultural context of the DPA approach implementation, the study visits to social work institutions that use the Empowerment concept in their interventions were organized during the workshops.

Methodology

The research methodology was based on the concept of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2007, p. 1), including a participatory approach. Action research is a social research strategy that combines the competencies of researchers with the knowledge and commitment of research participants in the face of social, political, or environmental problems (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). Purposeful sampling was applied. Twelve people (NGO employees and academic teachers) were selected from partner institutions to participate in the research.

The research involved a triangulation of methods. Within the quantitative part, a diagnostic tool for measuring professional and social skills was prepared (pre – and post-test). The first research stage included diagnosing the professional and social skills of DPA workshops participants at the start of their participation in the project. The second stage involved the diagnosis of additional professional and social skills resulting from the nature of the training based on the Empowerment concept acquired during a series of 5 workshops. Statistical analyses were performed to compare the results obtained in the first and second stages of the study. All the obtained variables were expressed on an ordered polynomial scale (Likert scale), so in further analysis, it was necessary to use non-parametric tests and statistics. As two studies were conducted, but it was impossible to assign the respondents' answers from both studies, it was necessary to use non-parametric tests for independent samples. For this purpose, the Mann-Whitney U test (Domański, 1980, p. 144; Ferguson and Takane, 1997, pp. 457, 460–461) was used as the strongest non-parametric alternative to the Student's t-test. The effect size was determined from the non-directional formula for the rank-two-series correlation (r) proposed by Wendt. The observed probability (p) was used in reading the test results. If this probability was lower than the assumed significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, then the null hypothesis on the lack of differences between the first and second test was rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis.

In line with the qualitative approach, twelve participants of the DPA workshop were interviewed. The interviews were conducted with eight NGO employees and four academic teachers. During the interviews, some data were collected concerning DPA workshops participants' experiences gained during the training and utilizing the acquired knowledge and skills in professional practice. The primary purpose of the interviews was to determine the

effectiveness of the methods learned by the participants and the possibility of using them in various cultural contexts. Analytical coding was used in the collected data elaboration (Richards, 2015, p.112–114).

During the research, answers to the following research questions were obtained:

- To what extent have the workshops participants’ competencies in using the DPA approach improved?
- How do the workshops participants understand the DPA approach?

The results of the research are presented in the following sections.

Results

Changes in the competencies related to the use of the DPA approach in workshops participants

In the diagnostic tool for measuring personal and professional skills, which was used as a pre-test and post-test in the quantitative part of the research conducted in the project, two groups of competencies related to DPA can be distinguished. The first concerns competencies closely associated with the assumptions of the DPA approach; the second falls within the area of DPA and may also refer to broader professional skills. With regard to both of the above-mentioned groups of competencies, it was checked whether their level increased in the workshop participants after the training.

Among the competencies closely related to the DPA, the following were distinguished: 1) inclusive perspective on clients (p=0,061); 2) offering others the possibility to tell their story (p=0,048); 3) answering the needs of the client (p=0,094); 4) identifying client’s needs on micro-, mezzo – and macro level (p=0,179); 5) knowledge of the DPA (p=0,003); 6) knowledge of Empowerment (p=0,000); 7) awareness of the influence of social context (p=0,038); 8) reflecting through different perspectives (p=0,044); 9) ability to teach DPA related tools and knowledge (p=0,024); 10) giving voice to people who are marginalized (p=0,012) (Table 1).

Table 1. Competences closely related to the DPA approach (N=12)

	Mean rank I study	Mean rank II badanie	Z	p	r	Dependence
Inclusive perspective on clients	10.4	15.5	-1.88	0.061	0.429	Tendency
Offering others the possibility to tell their story	10.3	15.7	-1.98	0.048	0.450	Yes

	Mean rank I study	Mean rank II badanie	Z	p	r	Depen- dence
Answering the needs of the client	10.5	15.3	-1.67	0.094	0.000	Tendency
Identifying client's needs on micro-, meso – and macro-level	10.9	14.8	-1.34	0.179	0.000	No
Knowledge of DPA	9.0	17.4	-3.02	0.003	0.000	Yes
Knowledge of empowerment	8.2	18.5	-3.59	0.000	0.000	Yes
Awareness of social context influence	10.1	15.9	-2.08	0.038	0.000	Yes
Reflecting through different perspectives	10.2	15.8	-2.02	0.044	0.000	Yes
Ability to teach DPA related tools and knowledge	9.8	16.3	-2.26	0.024	0.000	Yes
Giving voice to people who are marginalized	9.5	16.7	-2.51	0.012	0.000	Yes

Source: own research.

Statistically significant differences between the first and the second measurement, indicating an increase in the level of competences among workshop participants after the completion of the training, were found for seven out of the ten mentioned, with the most prominent change taking place in relation to those competencies that are key for the DPA, i.e. “knowledge of the DPA”, “Knowledge of empowerment”, “giving voice to people who are marginalized” and “ability to teach DPA related tools and knowledge”. A slightly smaller, but still statistically significant difference was observed in relation to “awareness of the influence of the social context”, “reflecting through different perspectives” and “offering others the possibility to tell their story”. In the case of two of the competences mentioned – “inclusive perspective on clients” and “answering the needs of the client” – no statistically significant differences were found, but a trend towards significance was observed. The lack of a statistically significant difference concerned the “identifying client’s needs on micro-, mezzo – and macro-level”, which may indicate the need to further deepen the skills of the participants in this area and / or their strong focus on the immediate situational context in which the client is involved.

The competencies related to the DPA, but also referring to the broader professional context, include: 1) challenging stereotypes, prejudices, and culturalization ($p=0,022$); 2) knowledge of participation ($p=0,001$); 3) ability to organize employee training ($p=0,005$); 4) ability to create new tools ($p=0,036$); 5) ability to show personal vulnerability in teams or with clients ($p=0,010$); 6) identifying structural problems/needs and taking action ($p=0,074$) (Table 2).

Table 2. DPA-related competences referring to broader professional context (N=12)

	Mean rank I study	Mean rank II badanie	Z	p	r	Depen- dence
Challenging stereotypes, prejudices and culturalization	9.9	16.2	-2.28	0.022	0.521	Yes
Knowledge of participation	8.8	17.8	-3.20	0.001	0.000	Yes
Ability to organize employee training	9.3	17.0	-2.82	0.005	0.000	Yes
Ability to create new tools	10.0	16.1	-2.10	0.036	0.000	Yes
Ability to show personal vulnerability in teams or with clients	9.4	16.9	-2.59	0.010	0.000	Yes
Identifying structural problems/needs and taking action	10.4	15.5	-1.79	0.074	0.000	Tendency

Source: own research.

Only in the case of one of the competencies mentioned – identifying structural problems/needs and taking action – no statistically significant differences were found between the first and the second measurement, confirming an increase in its level after the completion of the training. However, a trend towards significance was observed. It may again indicate participants' low concentration on the mezzo – and macrostructural conditions of the functioning of beneficiaries they offer to support. With regard to the remaining competencies related to the DPA, the existence of statistically significant differences between the measurements was proved. Thus, the increase in participants' competencies after the workshop was confirmed.

Understanding of the DPA approach by the workshops participants

To supplement the data obtained in the quantitative study, non-categorized interviews were conducted with the participants of the workshops regarding their subjective understanding of the DPA approach. In their statements, the respondents referred to the DPA approach in terms of agency, emphasizing its focus on the resources of each person, which was taken as the first analytical category. The respondents defined the DPA approach as *“working with participants or groups, based on strengthening their resources, using skills they already have, and opportunities provided by their environment”* (Respondent 3). They also believed it was *“helping people out of a difficult situation. Giving them the power to find the strengths that will help them overcome the difficulties they face”* (Respondent 4). In their statements, the respondents pointed

out that the traditional way of understanding help and support for socially excluded people in this approach is not a priority aspect, as evidenced by the following statements:

- *“Traditionally, the social educator is the person who knows. And in that approach, the beneficiary, or the person concerned, is a person who knows. And we just have to make the person aware of a total process of empowering”* (Respondent 7),
- *“Helping people the new way, it’s a new perspective for me of considering our work. It’s a new way of considering beneficiaries... I like the focus is much more on the beneficiary to me with that approach... It is about engaging a person in their project”.* (Respondent 6),
- *“The DPA approach is a different approach to working with people ... focusing on how they can act to change themselves, change their life situation”* (Respondent 2).
- *“A way to empower them (beneficiaries)... Forcing your beneficiaries to think doesn’t work... it’s not working, and it doesn’t empower them. It doesn’t give them the keys to like engaging in the project themselves and do things themselves... . The role of the community around the beneficiary”* (Respondent 6).

The respondents perceive the DPA approach as an innovative way of focusing on people in need. Therefore, the second shared analytical category was responsibility, which means paying attention to the fact that social workers cannot solve other people’s problems but can only accompany the beneficiaries in solving them. There are some examples of statements that are the evidence of this understanding:

- *“Thanks to the DPA approach, I realized that their (beneficiaries’) problems are not mine. I can maybe manage or help them to manage. This is the thinking that the beneficiaries should take their lives into their own hands, make their own choices”* (Respondent 9),
- *“I think it’s an approach that fits with my attitude in this kind of work because it’s focused on letting people understand who they are inside. Improve their life starting from themselves...”* (Respondent 10),
- *“Taking into account the context from which the person we work with comes from, aimed at support/empowerment... (Empowerment) is focused on the participant, not on what we want for them, but on what they need for themselves”* (Respondent 3).

Other respondents emphasized that *“it is such an approach that gives a lot of life energy, faith that something can be done”* (Respondent 1), *“it’s a state of*

spirit" (Respondent 5). One of the respondents compared the DPA approach to the work of a doctor: "according to me, the DPA approach is in which the main goal is to help people to exist. It is an accompaniment in the process of change" (Respondent 8). The respondents also pay attention to the personal benefits of the DPA approach: "It is useful for me in a personal sense, but also in the sense that I can help other people. I.e.. for me, it's like letting me know that I can do something. That I have the strength to correct something in my life, which is a problem, which is a difficulty. The workshops have taught me this, i.e., that the strength is in me..." (Respondent 1).

Conclusions

Historical and political issues, as well as migration at different levels worldwide, make individuals with different habits, cultures, and social structures need to live and work together. It is the main factor driving intercultural education and a prominent issue (Aslantaş, 2019; Błeszyńska, 2008; Bennett, 2009). Education is an instrument for the comprehensive development of individuals and entire societies. It can take place at any age and can cover different areas. It is implemented through the activities of many institutions, both in a formal and informal dimensions. It can also occur through interaction with the natural environment, especially when such interaction is socially and culturally determined. Its intercultural dimension takes on a new meaning in the changing Europe (Lloyd, 2008; Civitillo et al., 2018).

Participation in the international project allowed the participants to get to know a new approach to working with people from socially marginalized environments, but also contributed to the knowledge of other sociocultural perspectives, which became the basis for designing innovative aid solutions. The initiatives taken as part of the project are in line with the words of Jerzy Nikitorowicz. He claims that "intercultural education is just moving from the already noticed multiplicity to the interaction of cultures, i.e., from passive adaptation to inter-action and it prepares for cooperation and mutual use of the achievements of people of different races, nationalities, religions, cultures" (Nikitorowicz, 2009, p. 292). In this way, intercultural education aims to minimize or prevent possible tensions, biases, privileges, or stereotypes that can occur between societies and individuals (Perry and Southwell, 2011; Portera, 2008). This aspect was of great importance during the implementation of the project. Different perspectives and socio-economic or cultural situations constituted the essential value in creating a training offer regard-

ing the DPA approach. As a result of the project activities, the TOOLBOX was developed and translated into the partners' languages. In addition to the English version, Polish, French, Spanish, Italian, and Flemish versions are available. The materials included in TOOLBOX are the result of international cooperation, based on the previous experiences of the partners, taking into account their sociocultural perspective. Still, at the same time, they also result from designing joint aid activities based on the Empowerment concept and the DPA approach. The TOOLBOX will be available to all project partners using the developed materials to train subsequent educators.

The data obtained as a result of empirical research led to the assumption that the activities undertaken within the framework of the project turned out to be effective and valuable for the participants. All respondents believe that the DPA approach is an effective form of providing support to socially marginalized people. In the current socio-economic situation in Europe, helping the excluded takes on a new meaning. The socio-economic transformation and challenges caused by previously unknown or distant problems mean that many people, especially those from marginalized environments or suffering from dysfunctions, will not cope without adequate support. For this reason, empowerment-oriented education is a priority task, thanks to which individuals, groups, organizations and communities in difficult situations can regain control over their own lives.

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