The Role of Reflexive Support of University Students in the Learning Process

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Abstract--- Modern university education has undergone a change in the 'teacher - student' relationship. Joint research in the world of the new and unknown has made students full-fledged contributors and co-creators in the process of learning. However, although the way of interaction has changed, the role of the teacher in establishing learning environment still remains 'meta-positional'. The topicality of this research lies in the demand of the modern society for a new type of professionals who can face its challenges. The research provides theoretical framework for the problem of university training of students.

The article presents results of implementation of reflective approach principles: individualization of learning, establishment of a learning dialog, analysis of pedagogical work from the positions of the teacher, student and meta-position, developing subject-to-subject relations in the course of learning.

The main approach to study this problem is reflective approach which helps provide pedagogical support to every student individually.

Longitudinal procedures and methods were used to study undergraduate and master's students studying psycho-pedagogical education and aged 17-21 and 22-35 respectively. The analysis of data was performed for 82 students.

Our experimental study proves pedagogical relevance, need and feasibility of putting the principles of reflective approach into practice. Psycho-pedagogical study found positive effect of reflexive support on the learning process. As early as at the second stage of the experiment students from experimental group gained and mastered the experience of studying in aggregated or permanent groups and the experience of individual, group and collective reflection. They started analyzing what drove their behavior. Having mentioned external factors along with internal ones, in most cases they found the causes in themselves, their actions and abilities. However, over the two years of study, master's students did not reach the same level as undergraduates, even though they belonged to an older age group. Based on the analysis of reflective skills of every type, it is possible to observe a certain pattern in their development: personal and communication skills are formed first while intellectual and cooperative ones are built upon them.

The results presented in the article can be used by lecturers and researchers who train future pedagogues and tutors as well as related professionals such as teachers and psycho-pedagogues.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For today's young people, education determines life trajectory and often equals to success. The main Russian education regulation, the federal law 'On education in the Russian Federation', defines education as an integrated and purposeful process of educating and mentoring. Education is the management of students' efforts to acquire knowledge, skills and abilities, obtain work experience and develop competences, while mentoring aims at students' development and creating the environment necessary for his or her self-identification and socialization based on socio-cultural and moral values and social rules and norms of behavior for the benefit of a person, family, state and society.

The main moderator of the learning process at university is the teacher who establishes a dialog between the cultural norm and students. Mental activity (as understood by G. Shchedrovitsky), which includes a teacher and students, imposes requirements on the teacher's reflective competence [1]. On the one hand, teachers identify themselves as professionals, on the other – they must recognize the environment in which students are immersed. Modern education "focuses on the need to retain the teacher's event 'meta-position' when, while being 'close', (s)he at the same time exists in the 'transpersonal'." [2]

The type of teaching focused on creating the conditions facilitating students' personal development and fulfillment and building their independence and confidence in various real-life situations where a choice must be made is called pedagogical support [3].

General characteristics of pedagogical support include:

1. Integrity (teaching can embrace all spheres of the learning precess to expose factors that cause difficult life situations);
2. Continuity (a teacher gives students continuous attention since only consistent interaction between a teacher and a student over a significant amount of time can have positive effect);
3. Humanism (a teacher's attention to students' lives and activities must be person-oriented and follow an individual approach at every stage of teaching) [4].

A teacher (mentor or tutor) or a teacher group provide the conditions where students can make a conscious choice – a choice as a form of an axiological attitude towards life and people, based on the internalized hierarchy of values and enabling students to construe meaning. For a young person, choice indicates agency (personal maturity): awareness, independence, responsibility when the main tool for understanding a difficult situation is reflection. According to C. Bühler, when a person reaches adolescence, (s)he starts feeling the need of self-awareness and self-identification but it takes much effort for this embryonic need to be fulfilled. For this reason, it is vital that young people have an environment and, most importantly, a mediator (a teacher who sustains this environment) which will help them actualize their interests and passions. Any kind of hardship during learning can be overcome by 'the efforts of a teacher and a student striving for self-education' [6].

It is in adolescence that people become involved in different areas of life: law, religion, politics, morality etc., shaping step by step the student's personality. 'This age is characterized by uncertainty and persistence in one's views, beliefs, orientations and attitudes; a pursuit of respect and authority and introspection; this is the time of personal and social self-identification, a search for the ways to fulfill oneself, which require clear understanding of one's place in life. The latter in turn demands the development of self-reflection, a worldview and mindset...' [7, p. 87].

New socio-psychological qualities acquired at this age are a defined aspiration to build long-lasting relationships and have meaningful communication with people, growing initiative, effortless and memorable contacts [8]. A learning group is a primary community which must create the environment where every student can communicate meaningfully and implement their initiatives. But, as a rule, young people communicate beyond formal groups and form contacts in many informal and virtual environments.

During such contacts, young people form attitudes towards themselves and other people and begin to understand the importance of moral values. However, it is worth noting that they still do not possess enough life experience. At this age, young people choose which values to be be guided by. It also stands to mention that during this time, young people discover an interest towards the opposite sex which can prevail and weaken the already established values [9]. This in turn always has its impact on the learning process: a young person either devaluates learning achievements and puts less efforts and hard work into studies or makes learning his or her goal and a tool to build the future career as a fundamental form of activity.

This stage of a person's development is also marked by growing financial independence, weakening bonds with parents and starting a family. In his study of Russian students, I. A. Kondrashov showed that 'approximately 30% of students worked during summer holidays and about a half of them kept on working along with their study', while according to E. A. Kukanova, up to 46% of students work and get paid [9, p. 91]. The analysis of students' motives to work shows that most spend their earnings on entertainment, clothes, audio- and video-devices, mobile phones (45.4%), 31.8 % help their parents and only 22.7% of daytime students pay their tuition fees [9].

The analysis of socio-psychological profile of modern students revealed their essential characteristics, such as: realization of their individuality; growing self-awareness; a search for identity; formation of their own system of values; meaningful communication; proactivity; involvement in sexual relations; strive for financial independence.

Most importantly, studentship is the time when a person is assuming the authorship of his or her life principles and starts following them.

Such an authorial attitude often collides with inconsistency between a person's ambitions (to do, achieve something etc.) and his or her actual abilities in given circumstances and with available resources.

Based on the analysis of typical difficult situations, O. G. Filippenko distinguishes and describes their main groups according to their 'dependence or independence on a student' [10, p. 382]:

1. Objective difficult life situations — circumstances which a person cannot influence, and which do not depend on his or her personal abilities (for example, health limitations, physical disability, orphanhood, a lack of financial support);

2. Subjective difficult life situations are those situations which students can overcome themselves (like family and relationship problems or examinations);

3. Objective difficult situations caused by subjective factors, i.e. life circumstances that arise due to a person's actions or inactions (poor academic performance, expulsion, problems with dormitory housing).

Of particular importance is a young person's psychological attitude towards difficult situations. It manifests itself in a person's behavior, social activities and interactions with the world. The intensity with which difficult life situations are perceived depends on a student's personal characteristics. Thus, different people may treat and endure similar circumstances differently. For this reason, some students can cope with difficult situations on their own, while others need support. In this respect, the role of the teacher-student relationship is essential [11-13].

So, what is 'the reflexive support of students in the learning process'? The second section of the first chapter of the law 'On education in the Russian Federation' (dated 2012) clearly defines education as activities aimed at implementation of educational programs [14].

Reflexive support is viewed as an opportunity to create an environment where students can acquire relevant knowledge and develop the following competences: understanding of a situation, self-reflection, ability to plan their future career and make independent choices. Following G. Ya. Grevtseva's and M. V. Tsiulina, we believe that it is necessary to take into consideration "a person's individual qulities, area of study, emotional, psychological and physical conditions as well as the character of socio-educational environment" [15].

The transition to the three-level education system involves growing freedom of a student's choice when it is his or her right and obligation to elaborate their own educational strategy and career path. The focus of educational programs shifted to students' talents and abilities and the social purpose of education in the frame of such programs now lies in the development of students' potential and their ability to set their own professional goals and find ways to achieve them.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The goal of the empirical stage of our study was to experimentally test our hypothesis, in particular the statement that the efficiency of reflexive support is determined by reflective competence of a student which is developed in a certain pedagogical environment: studying by individual educational program, organizing a learning dialog, learning to analyze the pedagogical situation from different perspectives ('teacher', 'student' or 'meta-position'), establishing subject-to-subject relations during learning interactions.

We used the following methods for our experimental study: self-reflection inventory (A. V. Karpov), a methodology to evaluate students' understanding of themselves and others during communication (an adapted version of Q methodology), S. D. Neverovich, Samoukina, E. N. Kuchumova), a methodology to assess cooperative reflection (T. F. Usheva, E. A. Ponomaryova, E. V. Paravyan) [16-18].

A. V. Karpov's methodology to assess self-reflection is a questionnaire consisting of 27 statements. The participants are asked to respond to these statements by filling the number of the appropriate variant in the answer sheet [19]. Choices vary in the degree of reflection the participants show towards their actions, the importance of the details of the hypothetical behavior and the detail of the predicted results. When analyzing the results, we divided the participants into three groups. Scores of seven stens or more stood for a high level of reflexivity. Scores of 4-7 stens indicated an average level of reflexivity. Finally, score of fewer that four stens corresponded to low reflexivity. The results describe reflexive qualities that define the level of reflection.

The ability to understand oneself and others during communication was tested by means of an adapted version of Q-methodology, proposed by A. V. Batarshev. In this test, the participants were offered a set of cards with statements or names of personal qualities written on them. The test takers were asked to rank them from the most to the least typical for them. It was essential for our study that the students expressed their personality, i.e. real understanding of their abilities, instead of mere 'consistency or inconsistency' with statistical norms of other people.

To evaluate the level of intellectual reflection we modified a methodology used to study elements of reflexive analysis of chess players developed by S. D. Neverovich, N. V. Samoukina and E. N. Kuchumova. This methodology is based on the concept of developmental teaching: on studies of the learning process (D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davydov, S. D. Neverovich, V. V. Rubtsov), on the understanding how students' reflection is formed (V. I. Slobodchikov, G. A. Zuckerman, A. Z. Zak). Thus, reflection is a cognitive effort to identify foundations of one's own mental activity. The ability to correctly estimate the position is one of the most important criteria. The same holds true for our case, as this ability enables the teacher to orient quickly in a given pedagogical situation.

To measure cooperative reflection, a special methodology was developed (T. F. Usheva, E. A. Ponomaryova, E. V. Paravyan), which includes two steps: group and individual. The methodology is based on the activity approach: after performing an action, the participants are asked to individually reflect on it. The results of such introspection are then compared to the results of external observation and analyzed. In such a way, conclusions are made regarding the level of development of the students' abilities to: identify themselves, focus on a group task, assume responsibility for the group, organize group activities step by step, compare results of the actions with the goal.

We used a comprehensive technique to measure the development of the following reflective skills:

Personal – the ability to analyze oneself, sensible self-perception, the ability to identify and analyze causes of one's own behavior as well as its results and mistakes that were made; understanding one's own personal qualities in the present compared to those in the past and the ability to predict their development in the future;

Communicative – the ability to 'see through someone else's eyes', understanding causes of another person's behavior during interaction, analysis of the past situations and the ability to take other people's actions into account when planning one's own behavior;

Intellectual – the ability to identify foundations of an activity, evaluate one's own viewpoint, predict the next step of an action, go back and analyze if the adopted plan of action is a correct one.

Cooperative – self-identification in a work situation, the ability to focus on a group task, assume responsibility

for the group, organize group activities step by step, compare results of the actions with the goal.

The participants of our experimental study of reflexive sklls were students of Irkutsk State University. Longitudinal procedures and methods were used to study undergraduate and master's students in the area of psychopedagogical education aged 17-21 and 22-35 respectively. The analysis of data was performed for 82 students.

III. RESULTS

The cooperative reflection test required to compare the measures (self-identification in a work situation, the ability to focus on a group task, assume responsibility for the group, organize group activities step by step, compare results of the actions with the goal) of introspection and external observation across assessments separately for each group. The measures were compared using Spearman correlation coefficient (see the tables).

Table 1: Comparison of external observation and introspection for the experimental group (undergraduate level)

Measure	1st assessment	2nd assessment	3d assessment	4th assessment	5th assessment	6th assessment
Self-identification	-0.348	-0.123	0.717	0.690	0.938	0.831
Group task	-0.059	0.309	0.671	0.581	0.897	0.811
Responsibility	-0.080	0.242	0.653	0.844	0.800	0.820
Step-by-step organization	0.174	0.352	0.786	0.886	0.880	0.698
Comparison of results with the goal	0.539	0.048	0.867	0.878	0.729	0.799
Total score	-0.178	0.180	0.878	0.910	0.934	0.941

Decreasing scores of the experimental group can be explained by the very mechanism of reflection development which is triggered when hardships arise. At the first stage of the experiment, students from the experimental group had difficulties finding their identities, the goals of their work and could not define and describe its results. Problematization made students aware of their academic incompetence at the first stage of the experiment and professional incompetence – at the second (during teaching, learning and organizing the learning process) but conscious withdrawal from problematization allowed them to analyze themselves and the situation in general in the future: see positions of other participants, analyze their goals, compare them with results, act step by step and take responsibility for their actions.

Table 2: Comparison of external observation and introspection for the experimental group (master's level)

Measure	1st assessment	2nd assessment	3d assessment
Self-identification	-0.35	-0.130	0.31
Group task	-0.05	0.22	0.30
Responsibility	-0.08	0.19	0.48
Step-by-step organization	0.17	0.2	0.62
Comparison of results with the goal	0.54	0.03	0.61
Total score	-0.18	0.15	0.52

Master's students do not reach the same level as undergraduates even though they belong to an older age group. Based on the analysis of reflective skills of every type, it is possible to detect a certain pattern in their development: personal and communication skills are formed first while intellectual and cooperative ones are built upon them.

IV. DISCUSSION

Through reflexive support students develop reflective skills in a specially created learning environment. They learn to make decisions and predict their consequences, analyze their own work (its progress and intermediate results), identify their position in a problem situation and master techniques of communication in a group [20]. The modern university 'calls for such kinds of pedagogical support which best facilitate the main components of reflexive consciousness – a priori positive attitude towards other people; empathy; open-mindedness and will to develop and expand cultural experience; recognition of absolute value of every human life' [21-23].

Responsibility for the group is difficult to form. We have found that it develops only through having a steady position and focusing on a group task. Hence, we can see the development of responsibility only after self-identity and focus on a group task have been built.

Awareness and understanding are built in turn on the basis of reflexive mechanisms, knowledge and practical activities. Results of these manifest themselves in the form of concrete cultural products such as: reflexive texts, academic papers, programs, projects etc.

The most essential expected result is the transition of students' competences to a new level. Such a transition becomes possible when a student learns to realize, understand and estimate the strategies of action that exist in the modern world.

The defining characteristic of pedagogical support is creating favorable learning conditions. Reflexive support in the teaching implements the following principles which can be viewed as learning conditions: agency in the process of learning, individualization, dialogical and meta-disciplinary character.

The principle of agency in the process of learning implies students' pro-activity, when they can always ask themselves the question "Why am I doing this?" and answer it. When analyzing and evaluating their own actions and themselves as actors, they can answer the questions: "What kind of student am I?", "What are my personal qualities?", "In a given situation, am I acting according to my general principles?", "What are my beliefs?", "What are the motives of my actions?" etc. In our opinion, questions of this kind demonstrate reflexivity of students towards themselves as subjects of the learning process.

Introspection, the analysis of subjects of a pedagogical situation and the pedagogical environment in general are performed in the mind concisely.

The individuality principle within reflective approach means that reflection is individual and every student must receive individual attention. Individualization takes into account personal needs and qualities of a student. From a psychological point of view, individualization is a particularly important stage in every young person's life. It involves understanding of one's role and search for one's position in the society, development of a worldview, acknowledging certain limitations, finding one's uniqueness and creative initiative.

Organization of the learning process (educational strategies, speed, methods, techniques etc.) provides opportunities for every student. The experience of Russian university education has shown that to put this principle into practice, we need to use individual educational plans. Individual educational programs are based on reflection

when students' actions in particular situations are compared to their relevant qualities, such as knowledge, beliefs and identity and are developed in three stages: learning needs – learning goals – individual educational program.

Our understanding of an individualized education program (IEP) is based on studies of V. A. Adolf and N. F. Ilyina [24] who state that an IEP consists of the content of education (in its broad sense: information, knowledge, working methods and technologies) and activities aimed at its implementation. In such a way, IEP helps plan individual education.

Dialogical nature is a 'conversation between two people'. Dialogical nature of education includes the dialog in interrelations and interactions. The principle of dialog must be followed not only in external but also in internal processes. Dialog is an immanent mode of cognition which helps reflect on the subject matter of thought. One of the subject matters of thought can be a 'self-concept' (of a student, future expert, perfect professional etc.). Such an inner process leads to self-understanding and self-change.

Meta-disciplinarity allows for 'withdrawal' from education activities. This takes students' education from the disciplinary to meta-disciplinary level. Thus, reflection is interchanged with disciplinary training (during learning, research or mentoring) [25].

Such conditions meet the requirements of tertiary education that involves the interchange between organizational forms of learning (linear and non-linear), transition to modular curriculum, competency-based approach to result evaluation, focus on students' individual interests, abilities and inclinations [26]. Reflexive support of students in a new learning environment helps them rise to a new level of understanding of education results.

The main administrative body in reflexive support is the board of education programs. It primarily aims at the proper implementation of an education program in a given area of study and creating conditions for its successful completion. The board top-priority tasks are: to create an integrated interdepartmental environment that fosters high-quality implementation of education programs; to organize academic support and quality assessment of the primary education program; to perform expert examination within a given area of study.

The board of education programs includes graduate chairs, lecturers who are involved in program implementation and who represent relevant education departments. Different positions and meta-disciplinarity enables this board to analyze the situation from different angles and see the entire range of perspectives.

An important feature of reflection-based strategic administration is teamwork. Collective mental activity, whose basic tool is reflection, allows to respond quickly to new challenges, analyze the present situation in the context of the future, understand the needs and abilities of subjects of an education program and create an environment for its implementation. The board coordinates the development of education program contents (makes proposals regarding the contents of education plans and course schedules, ensures that competences consist with assessment tools and practical trainings etc.), monitors the designing and implementation of primary education programs and all kinds of teaching activities in compliance with the current trends in science, technology, culture, economy and society. A large amount of work is done using reflective administration technology. The technology includes four mandatory stages: reflexive analysis, constructive determination, stabilization and systematic reflection. Performing a range of

administrative functions, the board nevertheless follows the technology closely and puts every decision through the four consecutive stages.

The board of education programs as a body of reflexive administration has a positive effect on professional and personal qualities of its participants.

Regarding reflection as a tool of change management and development of activity systems, G. P. Shchedrovitsky states that 'a person always acts in a group, in situations of collective interactions'. Being in a certain situation and communicating within a group, a person interacts with people from different situations. G. P. Shchedrovitsky believes that 'space and time never determine the integrity of a situation, because a situation is defined by human consciousness, by how, who and where people perceive themselves to be' [1]. On this basis, developing the contents, forms and methods of implementation of a program in a group ensures high-quality results.

Mental activity methodology considers reflection a mode of thinking, a way for a subject (a collective subject) to learn about the foundations of their activity. The subject 'releases' oneself from activities and occupies an external position in relation to it.

Reflexive support in turn changes the forms of the teacher-students interactions. In a learning situation, every student has an opportunity to act, realize his or her value and value of others due to the collective form of learning [27]. Collective learning involves:

- No common front, as students pursue different goals and study different sections of education materials using different means and strategies over different periods of time;
- Different students studying the general content of education using different learning routes;
- Temporary cooperations as points of intersection of different learning routes.

Reflexive forms of psycho-pedagogical support (reflexive seminar, discussions, round tables, Balint groups, analytical case studies etc.), organized as practical training activities and then internalized by students, open new possibilities to fixate and visualize the progress of personal development, professional and personal identity during professional training.

Thus, mental activity methodology allows implementation of reflective approach during reflexive support through new forms of administration and collective learning. Necessary pedagogical conditions for reflexive support in learning are: agency, individualization, dialog and meta-disciplinarity.

These conditions also hold true for mentorship during reflexive support.

Mentorship develops students' personal qualities such as:

1. Respect for another person's dignity and ability to maintain dignity in different instances of social interaction (in everyday, professional and social life situations), i.e. personal culture, self-regulation;
2. A person's conformity (in appearance, manners, communication) with everyday, professional and social life situations, i.e. the culture of daily life, work, relaxation, healty life-style and communication;
3. Observance of ethnic, social and cultural traditions, customs, norms, ethics in mono- and cross-cultural communication;

4. Willingness and ability to use personal and cultural funds of knowledge (in humanities, natural sciences, economics, politics, law etc.) in problem-solving during social interactions, i.e. intellectual culture;

5. Never-ending need for personal development, i.e. the culture of self-regulation and self-identity;

6. Ability to orient oneself in ethical values dominating in the modern world or nation, i.e. in the culture of the human civilization;

7. Social responsibility for oneself, one's behavior and the well-being of others, i.e. the culture of social being.

V. CONCLUSION

Reflexive support of students in solving educational problems in today's university involves the creation of a certain learning environment which helps students position themselves as subjects of education, free and responsible personalities striving for perfection and self-fulfillment, which agrees with the principles of humanization of education.

In such a way, reflexive support helps solve the problems of education through students themselves as subjects of education and allows teacher (tutor) cooperations to rethink their world-view and attitudes.

Our long-standing work experience at university has shown that reflexive support of students during their eduction uncovers their existing personal qualities (not always positive), creates an environment for their axiological self-determination as well as understandling the situation, self-analysis, planning their future career and free choice.

Hence, the role of reflexive support in education is to create an environment where students assume freedom and responsibility to, using their own experience, search for the best ways to overcome complex situations in their education.

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