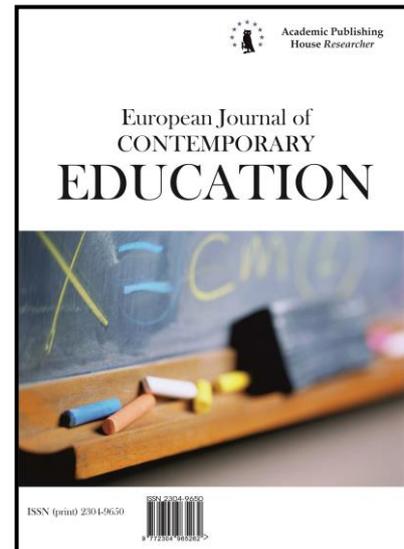




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## **The Personal Agency of Modern Adolescents: Developmental Opportunities in a Socially Enriched Environment**

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### **Abstract**

The article reveals the problem of the development of personal agency of adolescents in a socially enriched environment of additional education. It deals with the theoretical aspects of the problem. Attention is drawn to significant characteristics of personal agency, such as multi-leveledness, reflexivity, motivation, initiative and realization through interaction with others. Special features of adolescence as a sensitive period for the development of personal agency are revealed.

The article provides the review of the development of personal agency of adolescents at a socially individual, socially-communicative, socially-interactive and socio-moral levels.

It describes methods of studying the development of personal agency of adolescents at a socially individual level, which fix the level of cognitive activity of adolescents and their ability for self-development, allowing to identify five stages of development of personal agency – "observer", "student", "apprentice", "master", "creator".

The results of the ascertaining stage of the experimental study of personal agency of adolescents in different educational organizations (secondary school, additional education centre) are presented. They reveal that there are certain discrepancies in the control and experimental groups both in the formation of personal agency and in the level of adolescents' need for self-development as one of the leading indicators of personal agency.

The issues of creating pedagogical conditions in the environment of additional education for the development of personal agency of adolescents are discussed. The article also substantiates the necessity of using special technologies to increase the personal agency of adolescents.

**Keywords:** personal agency, adolescent, social environment, socially enriched environment, additional education of children.

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## **1. Introduction**

Modern society is exposed to the challenges that demand from a person to manifest a high level of personal agency – activity, self-support, responsibility for their life, efficiency in solving wide range of tasks. The main hopes for positive social development are associated with the younger generation now – today's adolescents, whose transformative capabilities in a few years will become an important component of human capital.

Defining the ontological foundations of personal agency, philosophers revealed a tendency to treat personal agency as a set of dimensions (Zubova, 2011: 2). Thus, L.I. Antsiferova believes that the main characteristic of personal agency is a person's awareness of himself as a source of activity, of his ability to change intentionally, within certain boundaries, both himself and the world around him (Antsiferova, 2000). At the same time, some important characteristics of a personality are concentrated in personal agency – not only activity and ability to develop, but also multi-levelledness, reflexivity, motivation, initiative and realization through interaction with others.

Scientists associate personal agency with the development of a person's ability to realize their own, individual way of carrying out activities that are optimized in relation to external and internal factors by force of self-organization of their personal capabilities (Abulkhanova, 2016). According to E.V. Bondarevskaya, the properties that mediate the level of spirituality and humanity of a person, the degree of their freedom and life creativity, are personal agency (Bondarevskaya, 2011).

In childhood, personal agency is mediated by the level of development of the child's personality, and the process of its improvement can be considered as a combination of the following factors. The first of these is the accumulation of subjective experience, and the second is the development of subjective positions through inclusion in a variety of educational activities. At the same time, the child actively interacts with himself as a person through self-knowledge, self-realization and self-determination (Selivanova, 2017). It manifests itself in the subject's ability to individual and group reflection, in the ability to make meaningful choices, in the formation of axiological paradigm (Gushchina, 2013).

Scientists consider teenage years to be a sensitive period in the formation of personal agency. It is the period of coming into being such personal characteristics as self-identity, volitional powers, a sense of maturity, and personal autonomy (Dergacheva, Leontyev, 2011). Modern adolescents belonging to Generation Z or digital generation (Soldatova et al., 2019) are distinguished by the most active use of the Internet and social networks. When designing a new virtual world for himself, a teenager acts as an active subject of information and network culture. We can say that in the teenage culture there is a "rising of the Project-oriented city" (Boltanski, 2011: 87.). Intensive online activity of adolescents, on the one hand, creates the conditions for the deformation of the real self (Fine, 2014), leads to a decrease in empathy and an increase in the subjective feeling of loneliness, on the other hand, a teenager searches for high-profile adults and peers online, interacts with them, all thus actively socializing.

From our point of view, the personal agency of a teenager is an inclusive characteristic of his personality, manifested in his ability to self-organization and self-realization and that to build effective social communications, social interaction and moral-axiological relationship with others, aimed at satisfying his activity interest in world building.

The important thing is that if a teenager has already formed personal agency as his personal characteristic, it can fulfill the function of a certain protective resource, giving him the opportunity to withstand the negative effects of the virtual environment. However, the degree of impact of the digital environment should not be exaggerated. Today we are witnessing a burst in teenagers' volunteering, taking part in good causes events, joining various associations, etc.

Recently, researchers have been paying attention to the fact that the development of personal agency ensures successful integration into society in terms of developing social communication and social interaction skills as well as socio axiological relations (Mudrik, 2016).

Moreover, for the development of personal agency, according to V.I. Panov, it is necessary to incorporate a person into an activity, which in this case is considered as the highest form of the realization of psychic activity. At the same time, a person from the subject of spontaneous activity moves to a new level, the level of the coordinator of an activity (Panov, 2018: 76).

Taking into consideration the characteristics of the personal agency of adolescents belonging to generation Z, it is possible to define the areas of activity in which their activity can manifest as

much as possible: educational and self-educational cognitive activity; social activity; communicative activity; project activities.

We suggest considering the process of development of personal agency of modern adolescents from the point of view of the development of their abilities at four levels:

- socially-individual (development of the ability to self-organization, self-understanding, self-realization and self-determination);
- socio-communicative (development of the ability to social communications, solving intra-group and external socio-communicative situations, etc.);
- socially interactive (development of the ability to organize subject-subject interactions, to analyze the experience of social interaction in real groups and social networks, to leadership in a group);
- socio-moral (development of the ability to social responsibility, to moral-axiological relations with subjects of the social environment).

Taking all the aforesaid into consideration, we can say that the understanding of personal agency in modern science has a many-valued nature. There is a need to study the process of development of personal agency of adolescents, which has its own age specificity and involves its study at different stages of formation and in different social environments.

## **2. Materials and methods**

In this paper, we present the empirical data of the ascertaining stage of an experiment in which the socially-individual level of development of personal agency was evaluated. The examinees in the experiment were adolescents from 13 to 15 years old, attending classes at the development center of additional education "Dialog", Kursk (experimental group, hereinafter referred to as the EG), and those going to a comprehensive school (control group, hereinafter referred to as the CG). Both the EG and the CG had 50 test persons, the total number of partakers being 100.

The examinees had been chosen through matching selection according to observational criteria: gender, age, academic performance. The examinees who studied in small groups in creativity centre "Dialogue" were found a match among pupils attending the same comprehensive school chosen from the enlisted pupils by method of random selection. That defined the limitations of samples.

We hypothesized that adolescents studying in an institution of additional education have more vivid subjectivity indicators compared to those students who study in a comprehensive school. An empirical study was conducted using two techniques. One of them – the questionnaire "Assessment of the stages of formation of personal agency" (V.I. Panov et al., Modification of T.A. Antopolskaya), allows you to identify the degree of personal agency of the adolescent put into the education system, takes into account the five stages of development of subjectivity – the "Observer", "Student", "Apprentice", "Master", "Creator". At the same time, personal agency is manifested as the possibility of independent action planning, setting goals, evaluating their propriety and effectiveness.

The technology of personal agency development in socially oriented activities was applied to adolescents from the experimental group:

Stage 1 – introducing a teenager to socially oriented activities and involving them in social tests. At the same time, the teenager acts as the "Observer" of the actions and behavior patterns of the teacher, but does not proceed with the activity itself. The teaching staff provides an opportunity for adolescents to get acquainted with socially oriented projects through studying the website of the institution and pages on social networks. They organize a great variety of events: from traditional "open doors" to festivals, holidays, special events, flash mobs, presentations, etc. A teenager takes part in the arrangements as a spectator with the right to enter into a dialogue at an event organized for him in order to create conditions for the manifestation of personal agency as an emotional acceptance of the event and motivation (at this stage – a cognitive focus on a particular activity, which is verbally expressed by the phrase: "I would like to do ....").

Stage 2 – a teenager has an idea of how to interact with social objects. The teenager displays activity only through an external example or stimulus of the teacher. Emotionally positive for social objects. This is the position of the Student. The student phase involves organized interaction with other adolescents under the clear guidance of an adult leader. The teenager participates in socially

significant projects, following the instructions given to him. He is a member of the team, but so far he is mastering the chosen activity, developing skills, actively participating in trainings and educational intensive courses. The personal agency of the adolescent at this stage is supported by the pleasure from getting knowledge, acquiring skills and abilities and is verbally expressed by the phrase: "I can, I can ...".

Stage 3 – the implementation of selected socially significant activities, participation in projects, promotions, going beyond the boundaries of your institution, and active interaction according to the “teenagers-teenagers” model. This is the “Apprentice” position. Yesterday's student receives leadership rights in a small group. He continues to follow the instructions of the leader (not necessarily the teacher). However, these assignments require the team work of a small group. The personal agency of "Apprentice" is expressed in the ability to make their own decisions to achieve their goals. Verbally personal agency of an Apprentice is expressed by the phrase: "I make decisions, I am responsible for their consequences, I am ready to achieve results together with my team." The activity of the adolescent at this stage is supported by the approval of the leader and success in the implementation of instructions in the process of CO-action, CO-experience.

Stage 4 – a teenager participates in transformation socially oriented activities, his own projects, mentoring, engaging with society. This is the "Master" position. Reaching the Master level, a teenager manages his own projects approved by the leader. The authorship of the idea, the planning of actions, the selection of tools, the search for resources, the distribution of assignments, the monitoring of implementation, the implementation and dissemination of socially useful practices belong to the “Master”. The motto of their personal agency is the phrase: "I know what to do, and I will teach you!"

Stage 5 – the position “Creator” – the highest stage of development of personal agency, it is often unattainable in full. Only those adolescents who have made their career choice or have high abilities in some activity or are gifted get to this level of development of personal agency. The “Creator’s” projects do not have to be accompanied by a leader (teacher or experienced designer). "Creator" can fully accompany the projects of "Masters", that is, thus being a mentor in the model "teenager – to teenagers." But mentoring is not the main occupation of the “Creator”. He has his own concernment, which is based on his idea of social transformation. "Creator" has the abilities of a strategist and tactic in one person, he is a leader, his personal agency is manifested in the credo: "I will make this world beautiful!" “Creator” is not a narcissistic type; he soberly assesses the situation, sees the risks and imperfection of his performance. The teenager at this stage of technology implementation is characterized by a high willingness to transform, he is firmly on the path of education and self-education, has a strong and stable interest, and has the charisma of a leader.

Since a number of authors consider the focus on personal self-development as one of the important signs of personal agency, we used the “Diagnostics of the realization of self-development needs” methodology (Fetiskin et al., 2002) to identify the degree of the acceptance of certain indicators of self-development need in adolescents in the studied groups. The authors identified 15 indicators of this kind, each evaluated on a five-point scale, corresponding to the gradation from full acceptance to its insignificance.

To assess the degree of reliability of differences between the studied parameters in the control and experimental groups, we used such a method of mathematical statistics as  $\chi^2$  – Pearson's criterion.

In order to create psychological and pedagogical conditions for the development of personal agency, adolescents of the experimental group were included in a special program of socio-psychological trainings by E. Druzhina, meeting the requirements of the adolescent's need for self-development. The content of the trainings included the following topics: “Secrets of willpower: how to overcome laziness?”, “Self-confidence is real”, “How to manage your emotions and cope with stress”, “I am a leader”, etc.

### **3. Results**

The results of the questionnaire “Assessment of the stages of formation of personal agency” gave us the opportunity to compare the frequency of occurrence of certain stages of personal agency in adolescents in the process of realization of socially oriented activities (see Table 1). Having determined the correspondence between the stage and the particular survey participant,

we calculated the frequency of occurrence of each stage in the EG and CG. Basing on this they were assigned a rank from the first to the fifth, where the first rank corresponded to the stage most often observed among the respondents.

In the control group, more than half of the participants (56 %) placed themselves into the third stage, the “Apprentice”, thereby admitting their lack of independence in terms of evaluating the results of socially oriented activities. The second place, 26 % of adolescents, is taken by the “Student” stage, in which one's own activity is qualitatively manifested only if there is a standard that needs to be imitated. The third rank is at the “Master” stage – 10 % of adolescents believe that they are completely independent in planning activities and setting its goals. The fourth rank was received by the “Observer” stage, in which difficulties with independent activity are observed even with external support (6 %). The last, fifth, rank was given to the “Creator” stage, the most difficult stage, which makes it possible not only to control one’s own activity, but also to influence others (2 % of adolescents).

In the experimental group as well, the first place belongs to the stage "Apprentice", it is typical for 48 % of adolescents. The second place, 28 % of respondents, occupies the "Master" stage. The third rank belongs to the “Student” stage (16 % of respondents). The fourth rank – to the “creator” stage (6 % of adolescents), and the fifth rank is given to the stage of “Observer”; it is inherent in only two percent of schoolchildren.

**Table 1.** The occurrence rate of adolescents’ personal agency development stages

	Control group		Experimental group		$\chi^2$	df
	rank	percentage	rank	percentage		
Observer	4	6%	5	2%	3.83	4
Student	2	26%	3	16%	14.43*	4
Apprentice	1	56%	1	48%	6.78	4
Master	3	10%	2	28%	15.76*	4
Creator	5	2%	4	6%	3.83	4

Note: \* Statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ )

Comparing the results of the control and the experimental groups, you can see that most of the adolescents who has taken part in the study are at the “Apprentice” stage, that is, they need some external control from a person who is knowledgeable in the activity being implemented and is able to correct and evaluate their work. However, the ranks of the rest stages in the studied groups do not coincide. In the experimental group, the presence of higher stages of personal agency, such as “Master” and “Creator”, is more prominent. The representation in the Master stage in the studied groups is noticeably different. In the control group, 10 % of schoolchildren belong to it, and in the experimental group – the index is 28 %. In addition, the initial stages of personal agency, such as the “Observer” and the “Student”, are much less common in the experimental group. According to the Pearson criterion  $\chi^2$ , the number of degrees of freedom being 4, the distribution of the results between the “Student” and “Master” stages in the EG and the CG is statistically significant at a 5 % confidence level.

The obtained results confirm the important role of the additional education in the productive formation of a socially-individual level of development of adolescents’ personal agency.

Our study also revealed certain differences in the control and the experimental groups in the needs of adolescents in self-development as one of the leading indicators of personal agency (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The level of acceptance of the need for self-development indicators in the control and experimental groups

Need for self-development indicators	The degree of the acceptance of the indicators										$\chi^2$	df
	high		Above the average		average		Below the average		low			
	EG	CG	EG	CG	EG	CG	EG	CG	EG	CG		
I aspire to know myself	53%	37%	22%	23%	19%	29%	6%	11%	0%	0%	6.42	4
I make some time for self-development no matter how busy I	6%	5%	21%	14%	38%	33%	24%	28%	11%	19%	4.28	4
Occurring difficulties stimulate my activity	35%	30%	18%	21%	18%	14%	17%	21%	12%	14%	1.69	4
I look for some feedback as it helps me to know and recon myself up	53%	48%	12%	20%	29%	13%	6%	19%	0%	0%	15.1**	4
I analyze my activity making special time for it	41%	30%	25%	20%	12%	31%	16%	12%	6%	7%	11.3*	4
I investigate my feelings and experience	41%	32%	41%	40%	18%	28%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3.29	4
I read a lot	24%	17%	22%	21%	24%	27%	18%	24%	12%	11%	2.29	4
I debate on issues that are of interest for me	46%	33%	24%	36%	19%	19%	5%	12%	6%	10%	7.96	4
I believe in my abilities	63%	45%	24%	29%	6%	22%	6%	6%	0%	0%	12.57**	4
I try to be a more outer-directed person	29%	23%	41%	36%	12%	28%	6%	6%	12%	7%	8.73	4
I am aware of the influence that other people have on	46%	38%	18%	19%	24%	32%	6%	6%	6%	5%	2.02	4
I am in control of my future career development and get successful outcome	35%	26%	22%	12%	32%	35%	6%	17%	5%	10%	11.33*	4
I take pleasure in learning new skills	76%	52%	6%	13%	12%	17%	6%	18%	0%	0%	13.94**	4
I am not afraid of the growth of responsibility	35%	20%	30%	26%	29%	36%	6%	18%	0%	0%	11.13*	4
Professional advancement	70%	61%	24%	32%	6%	7%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.83	4

Note: \* Statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ );

\*\* Statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ )

To define the degree of reliability of the observed differences, we compared the results of the experimental and control groups for each indicator using the Pearson  $\chi^2$  criterion, the number of degrees of freedom being 4. It turned out that for several parameters, statistically significant differences were found at a 5 % significance level. This attitude to the reflection of their activities ( $\chi^2 = 11.3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), the management of their future professional development ( $\chi^2 = 11.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and the attitude to increasing responsibility ( $\chi^2 = 11.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

In addition, statistically significant differences at the 1% level were present between the experimental and control groups in such indicators as the search for feedback for self-esteem and self-knowledge ( $\chi^2 = 15.1$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), faith in one's own abilities ( $\chi^2 = 12, 57$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), getting pleasure from learning new things ( $\chi^2 = 13.94$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Note that these indicators can indeed be considered very important characteristics of an individual's personal agency. The combination of a tendency to reflect on one's own activity and faith in one's own abilities allows one to analyze the achieved results without disappointment caused by some errors. On the contrary, it makes it possible to take them into account and avoid them in the course of further activity. Being engaged in the system of additional education make the teenager to realize that he can really make independent choices, relying on his interests and inclinations, while at school he is obliged to study all the subjects which are on the program

regardless of how much he is interested in them. The increased willingness to accept responsibility among such adolescents characterizes their higher personality maturity.

At the ascertaining stage of the experiment as well as in the course of the experiment in general, noticeable discrepancies were found in the significance of the need for self-development of adolescents depending on the degree of their inclusion in the socially enriched environment of additional education. This was manifested in the fact that the average group result in the experimental group, got through the implementation of this technique, was 59.1 points, which, according to its authors, indicates that the individual actively fulfills his need for self-development. The overall result of the control group was 53.8 points, which can be interpreted as the presence of this need, but with an insufficiently developed system of self-development.

The fact that there are no significant differences in the greatest part of the considered indicators can be explained by a number of factors of socialization of adolescents that are similar in the control and experimental groups.

#### **4. Discussion**

The discourse of scientists on the development of personal agency of adolescents is associated with the use of pedagogical conditions that are created in various educational and social environments to ensure the success of this process. Our experimental work was aimed at testing one of these conditions.

To develop personal agency in the educational and social environment, researchers suggest that educators create spaces of social positioning allowing adolescents to achieve personal achievements such as meaning-making and self-determination. So, L.S. Vygotsky made a point that the child is realized through personal experience, which, in turn, is mediated by the environment. Hence, he sees the main task of teachers, first of all, in the correct regulation and organization of the social environment (Vygotsky, 1996).

To help teenager initiate a subjective action, it is advisable to design specific types of psychological and pedagogical situations for adolescents. V.I. Slobodchikov, E.I. Isaev distinguish three typical situations for the development of personal agency of adolescents: educational-experimental, project-research and that of a pre-vocational choice (Isaev, Slobodchikov, 2013).

The situations proposed by scientists for the development of personal agency of adolescents fit perfectly into the educational space of the school. However, the school environment, with significant potential for the development of personal agency, has limitations associated with the existence of strict regulations for organizing the life of teachers and students, having their focus on achieving the result set by the educational standard, ignoring personal goals, etc.

The social environment, such as the “social oasis” (E. Fromm), and the socially enriched environment (Chernyshev et al., 2007) have different characteristics. It marks a much higher level of intensity and content of both communication and joint activities. The activity of adolescents in such an environment is emotional, aimed at creation and cooperation. At the same time, they are included in the “fan of activities” that mediate the communicative, intellectual, behavioral components of the life of adolescents.

According to T.A. Antopolskaya, the socially enriched environment of institutions of additional education for children (Antopolskaya, 2009) preserves and cultivates the natural uniqueness of each child, ensures the accelerated the development of new social experience in interaction with adults of importance, implements various options for group and individual training, offers a free choice of content and forms of activity, has a huge educational potential, focused on moral, spiritual, cultural and social values.

In the environment of additional education, a teenager feels the freedom in both the choice of an educational program and in having the opportunity to test his point of view, judgements and role in various groups. It is in the environment of additional education that a teenager appreciates being a transformer, creator, a person who is actively responsible for other subjects of the social environment.

Another condition for the development of personal agency of adolescents is their subjective interaction with other social actors (peers and adults) and social objects (library, museum, etc.) in a socially enriched environment. It is important not only for the process of socialization of a teenager, but also creates new opportunities for designing and developing the system of his social relations with the world as a whole, gaining new personal activity experience.

To develop personal agency of adolescents, researchers suggest using active methods and technologies: social learning, technology for updating group potentials, team building trainings and those of effective communication. All these together also provide opportunities for the development of personal agency of adolescents.

In course of the experimental work our research team tested a technology for the development of personal agency of adolescents in a socially enriched environment of additional education based on their inclusion in socially oriented activities. From our point of view, it contributes to the effective achievement of certain levels of personal agency at each of its stages and has advantages in its variability, unique nature and polysubjectivity.

#### **Limitations**

The limitations connected with the number of examinees both in the control and in the experimented groups do not allow to extend the research data to the general community of pupils attending institutions of additional education thus applying only to teenage school children from Kursk.

#### **5. Conclusion**

1. A review of some studies of personal agency made it possible to state that such a phenomenon as the personal agency of adolescents has a multi-valued interpretation, its formation goes through several stages and can be studied at several levels.

2. The results of an experimental study of the socially-individual level of personal agency of adolescents demonstrate that the inclusion of adolescents in the system of additional education contributes to the development of their personal qualities that encourage them to strive for the new, actively plan their future and take responsibility for their choice.

3. There are pedagogical conditions in which the development of personal agency of adolescents proceeds more successfully: the creation of a socially enriched environment; subjective interaction of adolescents with other social actors (peers and adults) and social objects; the use of active methods and technologies in the education of adolescents.

4. The challenge of further research is to determine the characteristics of the personal agency of those adolescents whose main activity is communication on the network, creating a model of psychological and pedagogical support for the development of personal agency of a teenager.

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