EDUCATIONAL INTERVISION:
THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Teachers are confronted with challenges, which are of individual and organizational character (in classroom, in educational purposes, in groups and institutional structures). Therefore, they need assistance to find solutions in their own context without depending on external experts.

Such external counselling often is neither necessary nor helpful in every aspect and any circumstances, because of the biographical and institutional frame of the problem or conflict. Therefore, a method combining individual and organizational aspects of counselling, which recognizes the participants in the problem as the experts of its solution, is helpful. On the other hand free group discussions without a systematic methodical approach have to be avoided. Therefore, a certain training is needed in order to assist groups to work effective and systematically.

The following manual for instructing problem-solving peer groups (PSPGs) is developed from own experiences in teacher training in Latvia and Germany.

Although there are connections and interdependencies between this model of educational intervision with similar concepts (Balint groups, encounter groups, peer supervision, KoBeSu etc.), it has its special characteristics in the focus on integrating teaching, biographical methods and counselling with the concept of self-actualisation and self-organizing into a program, which is based on the conviction that persons and groups can become subjects of a systematic problem-solving process. Analysing the method of intervision in theory (literature) and practice (in teacher training) can open ways to such assistance without external experts.

Background, concept and aim of this special way of counselling, based on the model of Subjective Theories, should invite teacher-groups to make their own experiences. The manual (Appendix) can help teacher-groups to find own methods, rituals and rules regarding their specific situation.

Key words: *experience, intervision, supervision, subjective theories, teacher*.

Introduction

The theoretical background of the conviction and attitude of intervision, based on the idea of self-organization and self-actualisation, is the concept of subjective theories.
Groeben and Scheele (2001 and before) and others have developed and evaluated this concept. They underline that people who are aware of their problems and who are able to reflect and to communicate them in a rational and autonomous way are experts not only for their problems, but also for the solutions.

For the authors a subjective theory is not simply a single cognition, but a theory that consists of complex and interrelated aggregates of concepts whose structure and function can be seen, similar to scientific theories, to provide temporal stability (Groeben, 1988, Groeben/Scheele 2001). Therefore, subjective theories are complex action-guiding cognitions on a superior level, because they direct individual actions on subordinated levels as a kind of production knowledge (Dann

and Humpert, 1987). Because subjective theories serve a similar function for individual behaviour as objective theories do for scientific behaviour (Groeben, 1988), they enhance understanding, explaining, and predicting behaviour and/or events (Schmitt & Hanke, 2003). Such theories help to become aware of one's own resources and to find out one's own way to cope with challenges (Groeben/Scheele, 2001).

This model is based on the "psychology of the reflexive subject" by Groeben/Scheele (1977), who criticize the behaviouristic model of the human being as a non-autonomous subject controlled by his or her environment. Contrary to this concept it follows the idea of "man the scientist" (Kelly), which conceptualises the human being as a reflective and (potentially) rational subject, capable of language, acting and communication (cf. Groeben et al., 1988). Besides, humanistic ideas are connected with the epistemological model of human being, since it deliberately and decidedly is geared towards the (positive) developmental potentials of human being (Groeben et al., 1988). Therefore, it can be characterized as a prospective-elaborative model of a person, because the elaboration of future developmental possibilities of human beings is understood as a counterpart to today's information-processing approach (Groeben & Erb, 1997).

The concept of subjective theories suggests that the research subject can and should communicate with the research objects, following the goal of understanding their individual cognitions relating to the self and the world (Groeben/Scheele, 2001). Therefore, people have to understand complex cognition aggregates of the research object, because only the research object can decide on the adequacy of what the research subject has understood. Following Gigerenzer (1981) Groeben/Scheele (2001) calls it a three-place research method (concerning content of thought, research object and research subject).

The Process of Educational Intervision

The following process consists of two preliminary stages (1, 2), which prepare the adequate circumstances. The process itself consists of to two parts: an exploration of the problem and its backgrounds (3) and the problem-solving-process (4 a-c). In the end the participants evaluate their experiences and thank each other in a kind of ritual.

In the following chapters this process should be characterized and reflected concerning its implications and backgrounds.

Stage 1: Constitution and preparation of the group

While similar concepts of case work counselling (Babinski and others) often start with the case/problem, educational intervision needs a preliminary stage. Before someone is presenting his or her problem the problem-solving group (PSG) has to be established. This group acts as a counsellor/supervisor. Thus the external expert is only important for preparation and evaluation.

By semi-standardized interviews (or by using the "Heidelberger Struktur-Lege-Technik (Groeben-Scheele 1984) the different attitudes towards problems in school, their reasons, structures and solutions and also the communication skills can be explored. Furthermore it becomes obvious, whether someone is orientated in his decisions at single leaders or at the group.

Also by changing the supervisor's tasks (ask, reflect, organize etc.) between the group-members, the temptation of hidden supervisors/leaders can be minimized. Persons, who recognize the quality of problems as depending on people's interpretations, are able to reflect upon their own interpretations as well as upon foreign ones and therefore, they are possible members of the PSG (3-5 persons).

In order to improve such attitude, the group members are invited into a (one-day or longer) workshop (depending on the process), where the theoretical background (subjective theories, person as an autonomous, reflective, communicative and rational human being), the methodical steps (especially the importance of acceptance, discipline/rules and open-mindedness) and the

special quality of the group as a self-organizing, self-actualising assisting system (for a long term community) are explained.

Stage 2: The Setting

Confronted with educational challenges like discipline in classrooms or missing support in team or organization, teachers often feel alone because they are ashamed to share such problems with others imagining to be the single one confronted with them.

In order to facilitate the process of sharing, a fixed system of meetings is helpful (no matter whether there are actual problems or not). In each meeting every group member is invited to present his/her own theme recognizing that there is no reason of feeling ashamed, because the others have similar problems.

During the settings the different tasks (invitation, time-management, and rule-observation) change between the peers.

The fact that the group members have demonstrated an attitude of acceptance and empathy during the group-establishment and have exercised and improved it during the workshop, helps to remember and use such attitude during the process of problem-sharing without any external advice.

When the peer group has decided, which problem is a common one or more exciting than the others, they invite the "„presenter"" to explain it in more detailed form in order to find out solutions.

If he/she agrees, the problem solving Process (PSP) begins.

Stage 3: The Exploration

The „presenter" is invited to cope with his problem as an autonomous, rational, communicative and reflective expert of both, problem and solution, and as a subject of his/her learning process by reflecting his/her subjective theories. By telling the background, circumstances and aspects of the problem/case, he/she finds out the adequate structure by narration and helps others to follow this journey during the process of exploration.

The peer group assist him/her in his/her reflecting by active listening. Following the method of biographical or narrative interview they help to explore the important aspects of the problem by using helpful questions (what, where, when and who, instead of, why) and by facilitating an atmosphere of acceptance so that the „presenter"can feel comfortable. Nevertheless, the peers also are responsible for facilitating and evoking new associations and ideas by confrontation.

In interviews teachers often remember that they learn most from reflecting on their own teaching and from talking to or working with other teachers. This is especially important in the case of educational or communication-problems. By focusing on collaborative reflection or discussion about teaching experiences they can shape their own learning and professional development. Concerning difficulties, however with pupils, teaching-methods or colleagues, such reflecting needs a certain safe atmosphere. This is the setting of intervision, which helps to open towards others and towards oneself. In order to find out what people need for feeling safe and comfortable a certain kind of research is important. In discussing or by a semi-standardized interview (other qualitative methods (group interview, role-playing, etc.) may also be used) teachers tell about their experiences of trust and acceptance. In these narrations they remember a supportive relationship as the most important stage in their personal development. Such attitude is based on the conviction that the individual person is not the object (victim) of circumstances and external action, but the subject (actor) of his/her thinking, feeling and behaviour.

Stage 4: The Problem Solving Process

When the different elements and aspects of the problem/theme are obvious for all

participants, the „presenter" leaves the group and is sitting besides, while his peers discuss the problem in a very biographical and personal way (i.e. recognizing only the facts, not the person behind, telling experiences instead of advices). Listening to the discussion the „presenter" as the only expert of his/her problem and its solution has the opportunity to sample as much information as possible by using the same attitude (only recognizing what is said, not, who talks). So he/she can find out creative and innovative solutions by modifying his/her subjective theories by playing with the received information in three steps:

- Problem-solving by recognizing

Instead of excluding certain associations or ideas by remembering own experiences/ disappointments, he/she has only to sample (by writing down) what is said and to analyse the relation to his/her problem.

- Problem-solving by comparing

When he/she is sure to have received all informations from the group, the „presenter"can compare these ideas with his/her own experiences (not only disappointments, but also successful ones) and find a certain structure (known ideas – new ideas; already experienced (pos./neg.) – interesting; not adequate to my situation – need more informations, etc.).

- Problem-solving by decision-making

Based on these reflections the „presenter" joins again the discussion group and shares with them his/her experiences made during listening, can correct some misunderstood informations in his/her own report and ask for additional informations.
Being completely informed he/she makes his/her decision for a certain solution at once or leaves it for a later moment. In a certain kind of ritual (free) he/she thanks at last for assistance.

Stage 5: The Evaluation

The sharing of experiences during the process and the thank-ritual concludes the process of problem-solving. Although there might be no actual solution found in this meeting, the solution of the process is hidden in such disappointments: They remind of the conviction that solutions do not have to be misunderstood as external advices or prescripts, but have to be considered as the experience of recognizing in a new way, what seems familiar and of remembering thoughts lost in one moment of disappointment. Therefore an open evaluation (together with the external expert) is important to make this process by learning from experiences sustainable.

Commentary

Stages 1-3

Although these stages of the process are characterized by the question-answer-scheme, this scheme has much to do with dialogue. Therefore, it is helpful to reflect the methodical concepts of Buber (I-Thou- relation) and of the humanistic psychology (Rogers, Cohn and other). With the recognition that I need the other person for development and with an attitude of empathy, acceptance, flexibility, openness to confront, sense of humour and adequate self-openness people can become open-minded for the process of sharing experiences (intervision). Therefore, they need someone as a facilitator, who assists them. This helper does not have to be an external expert, who gives design patterns (solutions) or prescripts, but persons, whom the other colleagues trust in. This can open new options for appropriate choice of directions, without any kind of structural dependency.

As underlined above, this concept is first of all experience-oriented. Therefore, intervision as a dialogue among professionals within consultation serves as a catalyst for conceptual change,

because dialogue, as Cissna and Andereson (1994) and others underline, is not only simple back-and-forth exchange of information through verbal interaction, but characterizes a process of communication in which the participants meet and are open for changes. Therefore, as Caplan and others demonstrate, such accepting and open-minded dialogue in question-answer form can foster professional and personal development and help teachers to improve their capacity to deal with a current problem and future similar problems by reflection upon new informations and adopting into their own attitude and experience.

Stages 4-5:

In the centre of the Intervision process is the process of problem-solving. The group members as facilitators engage in a dialogue that helps to view the problem from multiple perspectives, to reframe the problem if necessary, and to generate hypotheses about the problem that will lead to possible strategies or solutions to address the concern (Caplan & Caplan, 1993 and others).

Such consultation process can be facilitated through a cognitive modelling of this process; thus the different stages become transparent and the participants can better understand the goals of it (Zins 1993). When people listen to someone else's experiences, they can share their lives in a more holistic way. Therefore, by intervision teachers overcome the limits of their rationality and turn their (educational and personal) problems for the better (Coles, 1989).

Part of this process involves listening to the ideas of colleagues and comparing those ideas with one's own (Richert, 1992). This can become a certain ritual based on regular meetings, which allow further exploration and collaborative assistance from the group members. In this way educators can learn more about themselves through involvement with others (Schwab, 1976).

Important guidelines for this process are that the facilitators should not confront in a direct manner but like an invitation ("Help me understand…", "Can you please explain why…") combined with actively listening. Such indirect confrontation works with associations and differences (victim and actor), ambivalences, paradoxical recommendations, w-questions, perceptions/views of partners/interview with the opponent, aspects of the gratitude and other methods (Schlee, 2004).

As the group explored multiple perspectives on the problem, the teachers were encouraged to reconstruct their understanding of the problems and to generate possible solutions. This process also encourages those, who were not presenting to really listen and contribute to the discussion by asking sensitive and responsive questions. Such careful listening and thoughtful questioning invites participants to analyse their experiences (Kolbe/Boos, 2009). The shared experiences provide all participants with a "sense of coherence" (Antonowsky and others) about their work, because they follow a certain process and not just prescriptions how to address and solve a problem. Because people learn more from listening how others are engaged in a struggle than from listening to their solutions (Corey and Corey 1997), they become motivated to share experiences instead of solutions by an adequate atmosphere of trust and acceptance and by facilitating the process.

Conclusion

Teachers confronted with challenges in school can get helpful assistance to find their own solutions and coping strategies by a systematic sharing of experiences.
The short survey about the concept of educational intervision, the theoretical background and practical consequences, underlines the importance of:
-    a facilitating attitude (based on acceptance),
-    an empathic preparation (based on recognizing the resources),
-    an open process (based on a self-actualising and self organizing system)
-    an evaluation (based on any kind of experiences)
Under these circumstances the tradition of an intervision group in school can help to transform colloquial discussions between teachers to helpful instruments for a common coping with every day challenges (and with special problems).

Appendix

The Manual:
1. Constitution and preparation
Questionnaire:
a) What I see as a problem, depends on
- the objective facts
- my point of view
- my experience
- external suggestions
b) In order to solve my problem, I need
- external expertise
- external advice
- to change my point of view/interpretation
- patience/faith/fatalism
c) Communication means
- to give/receive information
- to share experiences
- to exercise small talk
- therefore it is important
- to listen carefully
- to convince others
- to be open for new experiences
2. The setting
group manual:
who is?
- chairperson (inviting, setting, transparency)
- time-watch-person (every member should have the chance to speak)
- advocate (no discussing about persons, acceptance)?
3. The exploration
For the presenter:
My theme/problem: How to cope with disturbances in class?
(examples, aspects, questions, my aims and expectations)
For the group-members:
Can I accept
- the other is expert for his/her problem and solution
- his/her answers although when they sound strange/did I really understand them?
Do I need further information?
Can I confront him/her not with my opinion but with alternatives?
4. The Problem solving process
a) For the „presenter":
Informations which I notice:
Structure of informations
known ideas – new ideas; already experienced one (pos./neg.) - interesting ones; not adequate to
my situation – need more informations etc.
b) For the team:
What I noticed reminded me of.... / I remember that other people in such situation....
For me as a facts-oriented person the most important aspect is...
For me as a relation-oriented person the most important aspect is...
For me as an emotion-oriented person the most important aspect is...
5. The Evaluation
What is still unanswered?
what is the most important experience I made in the process?

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