

Experiential Education: A Pedagogical Alternative for Difficult Cases?

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project is to study the possibilities of the concept of experiential Education (in German: Erlebnispädagogik) for compensatory support in schoolwork. The article describes the experiences at a German secondary school. The main aim was to use the idea of experiential education to develop the social abilities of pupils who showed deviant behaviour at school and in relationships with others. First a short theoretical reflection about the concept of experiential education and its possible educational potential is given. This is followed by a description of the action research project and a discussion of the preliminary results. Schools have been struggling with a variety of problems in their teaching and educational mission. In the search for suitable concepts to counter the increasingly frequent learning and behavioural problems, experiential education has gained in importance. This concept places the experience at the centre of learning. The experience-action-oriented provision of learning situations is an interventive attempt at compensatory support for pupils with behavioural, social and/or communication problems. The initial findings from observations, interviews and action research related reflections on children's behaviour show that children with behavioural problems which are, in many respects, learning disabilities, can gain a different approach to themselves, to others and to the demands made in the subject lessons through special movement and socially related activity offers. The teachers involved report clear changes in children's behaviour and corresponding positive consequences for the regular lessons.

Keywords: experiential education, action research, compensatory education.

Педагогика переживаний – педагогическая альтернатива?

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Аннотация

Целью настоящего исследовательского проекта является изучение возможностей педагогики переживаний (Erlebnispädagogik) в отношении компенсаторной поддержки во время занятий. В статье описывается практический опыт средних школ Германии. Основная задача состояла в том, чтобы использовать идеи педагогики переживаний для развития навыков общения у учащихся, которые проявляют девиантное поведение в школе и по отношению к другим людям. В работе представлены результаты краткой теоретической рефлексии о концепции. Также следует описание исследовательского проекта и обсуждение предварительных результатов.

В рамках своей образовательной и воспитательной миссии школы борются со множеством проблем. В ходе поиска подходящих концепций для решения распространенных проблем обучения и поведения педагогика переживаний приобрела наиболее важное значение. Эта концепция ставит во главу угла опыт. Практико-ориентированный подход к учебным ситуациям рассматривается как основа компенсаторной поддержки обучающихся с поведенческими, социальными и коммуникативными проблемами.

Предварительные результаты, полученные в ходе наблюдений, интервью и исследования в действии, показали, что педагогика переживаний помогает детям с проблемным поведением, а также с особыми образовательными потребностями, изменить отношение к себе, окружающим людям и требованиям, предъявляемым на уроках, благодаря специальным действиям и заданиям. Учителя, принявшие участие в исследовании, сообщили о явных изменениях в поведении детей и положительном влиянии на течение занятий.

Ключевые слова: педагогика переживаний (Erlebnispädagogik), исследование в действии, компенсаторное образование.

Introduction

Personality development and the opening of the world have always been the primary intentions of schools. In this task (which is not easy in principle) old and new problem areas continually emerge, so that pedagogical theory and pedagogical practice have to find each other again and again. There can be no question of *this* pedagogical theory or *that* pedagogical practice. For example, the present increasing technologization and digitalization of the entire living sphere and its situation poses new challenges. People are becoming more and more individually oriented, modern society is becoming more and more diverse, and the globalized world is becoming more and more complex. Thus, the schools' pedagogical work of mediating people, society and the world is facing an ever-increasing challenge. Pedagogy in theory and practice is permanently searching for help, solutions, or adaptations. There seems to be agreement that not only *one* pedagogical theory, only *one* concept or only *one* pedagogical approach can be the solution, but

diversity. Traditional thinking must be combined with new insights, and the latest technologies and methods must be tailored to the well-trying and tested. In fact, a variety of pedagogical theories are juxtaposed with a variety of pedagogical practices, which sometimes prove to be compatible, but often are not. "Pedagogical practitioners should not and cannot promise anything, but they may well give hope" (Michl, 1995, 96; author's translation).

In this context, action research appears to be a possibility to shed more light on existing practices and to search for adequate as well as innovative forms of learning and teaching in order to be able to confront current problems in the everyday pedagogical life of schools (Rauch, 2004). One of the special potentials of action research mentioned by Elliott is that teachers' self-initiated changes are at the centre of efforts, while prescribed reforms are often viewed critically and rejected (Elliott, 1991).

Purpose and objectives of the study

This study presents an action research project in which behavioural problems in the classroom are addressed and alternative learning programs are developed. Research is iteratively linked to the further development of practice. The content draws on the concept of experiential education (Fischer & Ziegenspeck, 2008) and incorporating fundamental thoughts of *friluftsliv* [outdoor life] (Hofmann et al., 2015). The research methodology uses the conceptual ideas of action research as developed by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) (Lewin, 1948; Zeichner, 2002; Rauch, 2004).

Theory

Problem outline

The problem in schools of increasing behavioural problems of pupils is generally known. The spectrum ranges from mild attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity to grossly aggressive and destructive behaviour, bordering on violent or even criminal acts. When such behaviour becomes the order of the day at school, it is almost impossible to build a positive learning climate and conduct lessons. The frequently applied countermeasure of exclusion from class or even from school may temporarily improve the situation for the rest of the class, but it does little to help the excluded. Rather, it reinforces their underdevelopment in the social and intellectual spheres.

This briefly describes the situation at the school in Germany that is reported here. For years, attempts had been made to counter this problem with a wide variety of pedagogical means, but so far without lasting success. Finally, the teaching staff decided to look more intensively into the concept of experiential education. Other similar holistic concepts such as the 'elementary method' according to Pestalozzi, (1996) or '*friluftsliv*' [outdoor living] (Hofmann et al., 2015, 42ff), which is practiced in Scandinavia and focuses on sensual primary experiences in nature, are also included. In his elementary method, Pestalozzi describes a path of education through, and with, *head, heart, and hand*, which should lead from sensual experience and looking to useful experience and theoretical insight. The orientation of the *friluftsliv* can be understood in a similar way, but is mainly connected with experiencing nature. Physical, social, and aesthetic experiences in nature should contribute to building and strengthening ego competence and self-confidence. A sufficiently good emotional and social development is, according to the approach, seen as an essential basis for being interested in further development and learning in the first place. Through an experience-oriented program, the aim is to open up a different approach to learning that enables learning with (more) pleasure and interest.

With the approaches of action research, an attempt is made to cope with problems of practice itself, to carry out innovations and to reflect on them. Regarding teaching, Lewin is convinced that action research and education cannot be separated from each other and are always in a mutually dependent interrelationship (cf. Schratz, 2001).

Experiential education (Erlebnispädagogik)

Today's modern experiential education can be traced back to various sources and protagonists. These will not be discussed in detail here: for an insight into the history of development in the German-speaking world, please refer to Oelkers (1993) or Fischer and Ziegenspeck (2008). The basic idea of experiential education in the English-speaking world can be found in Kolb (1984). For more than a century, experiential education has seen itself as a complementary alternative to traditional and established educational institutions and forms. Its advantage is primarily seen in the holistic approach to the teaching and learning process. By addressing motor, social, affective, and cognitive areas simultaneously, experiential education attempts to open up new approaches to learning. In this view, experiencing and learning belong together. It should be noted that experiential education is not intended to replace cognitive learning, but rather to be a goal-oriented introduction or a helpful supplement in the learning process.

The educational theory and didactics of experiential education are based on the fundamental ideas of the German teacher and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Based on his philosophical approach to life, Dilthey developed the foundations of a humanities-oriented pedagogy in the second half of the 19th century in his phenomenological work on experience (Dilthey, 1992). According to Dilthey, knowledge is only possible through experience, in the sense of reliving and processing the experience. He describes this epistemological process in the three-step '*experience - expression - understanding*'. Accordingly, it is not the experience as such that is decisive for learning and cognition, but the pedagogical reflection on this very experience. According to Waltraud Neubert who, in interpreting Dilthey, made the concept of experience accessible to pedagogy in this sense, experience is an "eternally valid methodological means" (Neubert, 1932, 60; author's translation).

Another dimension of experiential education that is crucial important in this project is the experiential therapy developed by Kurt Hahn (1886-1974) (Hahn, 1958). Here, it is a matter of attributing a compensatory intervening function to experiential education actions in a socio-therapeutic sense. Through targeted experience-oriented tasks and challenges, the developmental deficits of children and adolescents are to be intercepted and worked through. The primary aim is to build up and strengthen ego strength, strength of character and a sense of responsibility, and thus to develop and internalize positive forms of communication and behaviour. This is seen as an indispensable basis for developing the natural potential for talent and learning. The intervention aspect is particularly important, as experiential learning can open up a different approach to oneself and compensate for socio-cultural deficits. Children can learn many things differently through experiences, "their senses can be trained, and diverse experiences can be gained that they would not otherwise have at present in many families and in their living environment". (Höltershinken, 2013, 67; author's translation).

The experiential concept based on primary experiences is vividly illustrated by Ziegenspeck in the model of the 'human experience circle' (Figure 1).

Individual level		
To be Curiosity Pleasure Love Self-awareness identity	To become Courage Creativity Achievement Autonomy Mastering	To want Interest Responsibility Steering Emancipation Integration
Heart Emotionality Soul	Hand Psycho-motorics Body	Mind Cognition Spirit
Life Relationship Humanity To be	Activity Work Individuality To become	Learning Education Enlightenment To want
Sociocultural level		

Figure 1. The 'human experience circle' Ziegenspeck, 1992
(from Fischer & Lehmann, 2009, 134; author's translation)

Methodology

Action Research

The project draws on the conceptual ideas of action research as developed by Kurt Lewin (1948) in the social sciences and later applied in the educational sciences (Posch, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2002). It is about tackling problems of practice oneself, trying out innovations and testing them oneself. The main intention is to improve the quality of work in a field of practice, here more precisely: teaching and learning at school and the conditions under which teachers and pupils work (Elliott, 1991; Rauch, 2004). Central moments are process orientation, dialogue orientation and reflection orientation.

From the perspective of teaching improvement and school development, the following aspects of an action research-oriented approach can be seen as beneficial (c.f. Rauch, 2004): the initiative comes from teachers who are interested in actively meeting existing challenges and improving their teaching situation and work. An important focus is on the pedagogical interaction between teachers and pupils, the evaluation is carried out by the teachers themselves, and quality characteristics are not externally predetermined, but emergently develop out of the reflection process.

Not least with reference to Dilthey's three-step approach, action research is understood here as a methodological approach "to realize the intervening and recursive connection between knowledge, action and reflection in relation to concrete social contexts" (Rauch, 2004, 19; author's translation).

Action research in practice

A multi-professional team of teachers – headmaster, subject teachers, social worker, special needs teacher and leisure teacher – as well as a scientific supervisor form the core team of the action research group.

The initiative starts from the class teachers. They report those pupils who are permanently conspicuous and place an unacceptable burden on the class climate and the work in class. After closer observation, these pupils are taken out of class for a few hours a week and placed in intervention-experience groups. The experiential education program consists of movement activities and physical challenges such as nature walks, climbing, skating, canoeing, strength games and exercises, balancing and more.

The intention is that new experiential situations, which are rather unusual in the school context, are offered in order to open up blocked emotional or psychological access points and thus make the pupils stronger for 'normal' everyday school life. It is primarily about building up and supporting a positive self-image. Here, experiential education addresses "as pedagogy the ameliorative change of the respective personal situation" (Fischer, 2004, 8). The activities are guided and carried out by special educators and systematically observed. The headmaster and academic supervisor supervise both the activities and the reflection phases.

Results

In action research, one can neither speak of measurable nor generalizable results. By iteratively linking research with the further development of practice, the quality of this research must rather be seen in its search and process character. Action research as intervention work for the development of teaching and learning is first and foremost reflection work. Donald Schön's conceptual thoughts on 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' can be used here (Schön, 1983; Altrichter, 1990), whereby the reflection work in this project must be done - albeit at different levels - by both the teachers and the pupils, since the aim is to improve the teaching and learning situation for both sides.

Action research as a qualitative research method also has to face other criteria of validity, and in this collaborative project communicative validation is particularly important.

This section therefore reports on different phases of reflection, which are mainly based on reflective 'naïve hermeneutics' (Rauch, 2004) of the teachers involved.

Reflection

The reflection work takes place on two levels: after the experiential activities, and within the action research process. The first level is a part of the experiential didactic to promote the pupils, the second provides the evaluation of the experiential education measures and their effect on intended behavioural changes and learning progress.

Reflection on experience

According to Dilthey's understanding, the experience only has an epistemic effect when it is reflected upon. This reflective work can be done in various ways (see Figure 2). Not only is the purely verbal description important, but also an individual emotional assessment of the experience. The more positive this is, the greater the chance for a general opening or stronger interest in similar situations or in other people. As methodological tools, well-known methods from social work will be used, such as 'analysis of energy level', 'movement analysis' or 'writing down thoughts with pen and paper' (Jugendleiterblog, 2018).

After the first descriptive and comprehending step, the next step in the reflection phase of the pupils is to transfer the experience, or more precisely, certain contents of the experience into a school and learning context. In this way, the experience can become knowledge.

The Diltheyan didactic three-step *experience - expression - understanding* is shown here in a double context. Intentionally, first to grasp and internalize the experiences through reflection and verbalization as an important experience - according to figure 2. But then also instrumentally, when the reflected experiences are taken as the starting point of an intended cognitive learning process. If the pupils are willing and able to put their activities, their experiences more precisely into words or even describe them in complete sentences, approaches of an alternative language and writing approach can be applied

here. Physical doing and experiencing leads not only to physical or emotional experience, but also to cognitive-abstract learning. Figures 3 and 4 exemplify these learning steps.

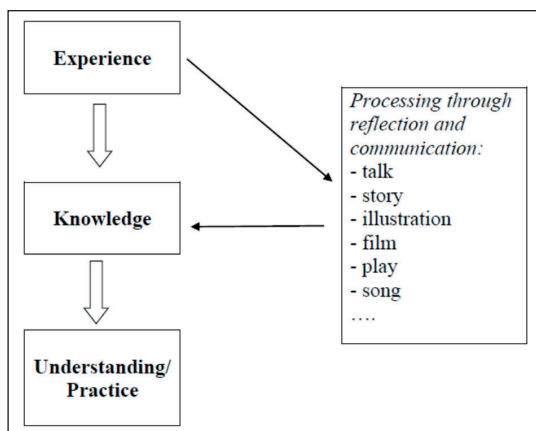


Figure 2. Experience – Expression – Understanding. (Zoglowek, 2009)

	Review	Experience	
Activity	place	equipment/material	evaluation
What have you done? Climbing	Where have you done this? Forest	What did you do this with? Rope, knots	How did you like it? super, easy, cool, it went like this, ...

Figure 3. Keyword description of the activities experienced

The keywords written down after the experience activities should now - and this is the professional learning component – be transformed into a coherent text, which can gradually be expanded into an experience report. Here the pupils can also add further comments such as photos or small film sequences. In this way, the experience reports based on experience-oriented activities can be used for the introduction and keeping of a report book in order to practice writing an internship report.

School as World of Experience
Activity: what, when, where ? <i>Yesterday we went again to the forest behind the school. We wanted to climb.</i>
Equipment/material: <i>Mr X had brought some long ropes. We were supposed to practice knots. He said, we would use the ropes for climbing.</i>
Evaluation: <i>At first it was boring. Why we should manage different knots? Later, when I slipped and nearly fell, the knot saved me. I was very glad.</i>
Comment/explanation: <i>I felt safest when Mr X was holding the rope.</i>
Pictures/Photos

Figure 4. More complex description of the activities experienced

Reflection on the action research approach

Turning to the success of the project, this was about improving the teaching situation in general through unusual measures. In concrete terms, this means bringing about a profitable class climate, but at the same time not omitting or excluding the pupils at risk, and promoting them professionally, i.e., striving for long-term reintegration into the class.

From this perspective, each pupil who succeeds is of course a tremendous success. At the same time, one must be aware that individual success is still very fragile and must therefore always be supported and underpinned. This is a task for the entire teaching staff. What succeeds in one pupil does not necessarily succeed in another. Every single case where there is a positive change in behaviour, or sometimes even just the hint of one, is received with satisfaction and motivates everyone to continue.

In the project reflection phases, which involves all teachers and educators, the observations from different lessons as well as the class situation are discussed. It is reported that there is a clear improvement on the relationship level. The pupils show positive approaches in social behaviour and also in improved work behaviour. This can be cautiously seen as the first positive turns in personality development. Of course, this does not apply to the same extent to all pupils participating in the experiential activities. Basically, it can be said that the experience-oriented offer is positively accepted by all, but the effects on the class climate and professional transfer are different.

Discussion

The relevance and generalization of action research related outcome was addressed earlier. The successes achieved within the project are of course only valid for this project: they are not only the results of this project, but also aspects that influenced the course of the project.

Findings from action research processes are not generalizable in the sense that these findings are equally valid and effective for all. But we can speak of a 'particular generalization', which in this case would mean a generalization of the kind of teaching that can be recognized as a 'general' pattern. Learning a new method or trying out an alternative teaching approach may lead more teachers to recognize or use this or a similar pattern in their own practice. This would be a type of 'particular generalization'.

The results of this project are to be understood in this sense. The experiences in general cannot be generalized positivistically, but they motivate the teachers involved to continue, and may also motivate other teachers to try something similar.

With regard to the objectives of the project, it can be cautiously assumed that positive body experiences contribute to positive self-discovery, which in turn has positive effects on social behaviour. Even if the activities do not appeal to everyone, every successful attempt can be seen as a confirmation and encouragement of this experiential education approach.

Conclusion

Action research in schools has some characteristic features.

- The research is conducted by those directly involved in practical innovative action.
- Gaining knowledge about and changing teaching situations interact with each other.
- The investigation of one's own practical action also includes the possibility of changing classroom reality. This changed reality the subject of lasting systematic reflection by those who participate in it as actors.

Teaching and educational work is always a great challenge for which there are no generally valid and successful concepts. In general, successful pedagogical work cannot be planned in principle (Höltershinken, 2013). Success seems to be more achievable through diversity and variation of approaches and concepts, of methods and offers. The diversity of approaches also includes the concept of experiential education. A holistic, experience- and action-oriented approach can especially do justice to pupils who are individually or socio-culturally disadvantaged. An intervention and compensation offer in which specific deficits are addressed and worked through must specifically take into account the emotional, affective and social aspects in personality development. The preliminary results of this project show that for socially and intellectually disadvantaged pupils, self-esteem can be developed through (positive) physical challenges. If this is successful, it also opens up greater opportunities for social and cognitive learning.

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