Changes of handicapped and other students self-concept and mutual attitudes as a result of their directed interaction

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Abstract

Academic environment represents important source of impulses of students’ personal and social growth. Among students arise informal relationships through which they exchange experiences. However, students have to break coyness and some barriers that restrain their relating to distinction. Directed interaction may be one of the tool that can help students to break their social difficulties. The paper summarizes the results of a project focused on the enriching the academic environment using the potential of existing differences among university students. A one semester-intervention program of personal and social growth called Sharing the experiences was created that is supposed to support the cooperation among handicapped, disadvantaged and other students.

Keywords: academic environment; student; handicap; self-concept; attitudes; directed interaction

1. Introduction and background

The current globalized western society is described as universal, multicultural, and pluralistic, also information (Havigerová, 2011), as well as culturally and value-relativized (Halík, 1999). The values of contemporary youth can find themselves in crisis in several respects. In addition to the historical and social specificities of Czech society, a further powerful influence is the task of their developmental stages that commands them to leave the safely trodden path of their parents and find themselves, their place in the world, and their own goals (Erikson, 2002). As Halík pointed out (1999, p. 48), value orientation is not “a matter of isolated choice of a lonely individual.” Its acquisition is subject to the process of socialization and occurs by means of significant others, especially those who represent authority for us.

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An important time in the evolution of values is the period of adolescence, when an individual ceases to be a passive carrier of the values of his educators and begins to more strongly assert his individuality. This is determined by his hitherto life experience but is not independent of the socio-cultural environment in which the individual currently lives.

Working with youth with the idea of developing and cultivating their personality means to be interested in and influence their values. Frankl (1997) distinguished three kinds of human values:

- creative values that an individual produces and gives to the world;
- experiential values that we gain and give us strength;
- attitudinal values that encourage a certain attitude in us in different life situations.

All these categories of human values, in our opinion, are substantial resources and conditions for the development of beta-level values, as is called the sphere of values of peak experiences and spiritual maturation (Erikson, 1943, quoted according to Macek, 2003).

The academic environment of UHK, with its diversity, is a rich source of ideas that can be useful in the personal and social development of students. All the same, students must overcome barriers that prevent them from forming a relationship to other values and other living individuals. For this purpose, a program of controlled intervention was established called **Sharing Experiences** whose main objective is to strengthen the interaction between the group of handicapped and culturally and socially disadvantaged students and other students, and by sharing existing physical, mental, social and cultural differences among students to cultivate an academic environment and develop the personalities of all involved.

2. Project description

The overall objective of the project was to support the inclusion of disadvantaged students in the UHK academic environment. Our sub-objectives directly related to supporting the inclusion were to create a space for sharing experiences and the mutual recognition of students, encouraging their personal and social development, and to start up the cooperation between the handicapped students and the other UHK students. For this purpose, an introductory workshop was realized in the premises of the UHK Auly Faculty of Education whose main objective was to bring us closer to the project objectives and to get 12 to 14 volunteers from among the students in the first and second years of undergraduate study, and to motivate students with specific needs towards cooperation. The interest was relatively high, so we chose the candidates based on ascertained motivation through an oral interview. The resulting number of actively participating students was 18, of which 5 students had a disability (3 visual and 2 physical).

The Sharing Experiences program was launched at the beginning of March 2011; it took place through a two-hour meeting once a week and was completed in May. During regular meetings we met with students, focused on the themes of verbal and nonverbal communication, developing creativity and a sense of humour, acceptance of our own bodies, working with feelings, recognition of the needs of others, self-assertion, and coping with difficulties and re-forging the prejudices and stereotypical perceptions of others. These socio-psychological issues were presented to the students by experiential education methods followed by sharing experiences emerging from various differences and group reflection. Another part of the project was planning and executing project tasks. In this part of the project, the students committed themselves to the implementation of an informal meeting of participants and leaders outside the school setting. One of the activities was a trip with an accompanying program followed by a multicultural picnic. In the coming autumn we are looking forward to a sporting event called Tearing Down Barriers. All of the events are realized by the students themselves.

The last part of the project is the documentation of the activities through the creation of a brochure. This task has been taken up by a group of students called Papparazzi who, in alongside working with the brochure, participated in all the activities, created invitations to the general public, took pictures, and made notes, interviews and surveys.

The entire program was based on the assumption that mutual meetings and sharing leads not only to a more intense introspection of the students, but, based on a deeper understanding of themselves, to a clearer
understanding of their motives or even prejudices. With an awareness of these mental contents, the individual has the opportunity to come out of himself towards something else, something different. Over the course of the project, students could mobilize and develop all of the above mentioned types of values (Frankl, 1997) and could discuss and be aware of their attitudes and their origins. The handicapped students represented a large and relatively new source of enrichment for the students. Many of the first-year students had hitherto minimal experience with a disability, and they perceived this contact as a powerful experience that served as a source of their own deeper self-awareness. Based on this awareness, we can then fully participate in this "otherness" without danger and without feelings of guilt from the loss of our own, or from our isolation (Lägle, Sulz, 2007).

To be aware of your characteristics, values, and attitudes means to expand your own self-image. Papica (1985) defines the concept of self or self-image as a complex, mainly cognitive structure of generalizations about oneself including the characteristics, abilities, knowledge, values, attitudes, roles, and other content by which the individual defines himself and into which he continually integrates new information. According to Bandura (1999), human functioning is generally influenced by external factors not directly, but rather through the Self processes. Self-concept can thus be seen as a hypothetical construct to explain human behaviour and experience (Blatný, 2003). Part of self-image is the body schema (the image of one's own body, its assessment), cognitive schema (a measure of self-knowledge in different situations), emotional self-image (evaluation of various aspects of self) and an image of one's self as a being (belonging to certain social groups, roles and self-demarcation). All of these aspects of the relationship to one's self were kept in mind and became part of the Sharing Experiences program. At the same time they became part of the survey that we realized.

3. Exploratory research – method and results

The objective of the exploratory research was to determine the UHK students' level of familiarity with the issue of handicapped and socially disadvantaged peers and to map the mutual attitudes of these two groups. The method of data collection used was two questionnaires of our own design, one designed for the normal students and the other for the handicapped. Both questionnaires contained 16 to 18 items of a different nature. 5 items in both questionnaires were semi-structured and unstructured. Their goal was to identify the specific nature of the problems and feeling the experience of contact with "the other" group of students, while the data was namely qualitative in nature. The rest of the items had a five-point scale of a “Likert” type whose inclusion was motivated by the intention of gaining quantitative data from both groups that would allow for a comparison of mutual attitudes. The acquired data were transferred to MS Excel and processed by statistical methods.

The survey was participated in by a total of 190 students, of whom 12 were handicapped (students with visual, physical and hearing disabilities), and 1 student socially disadvantaged (different ethnicity). The average age of students without disability was 19 years, 23 years for students with disabilities, and 20 years for the socially disadvantaged student.

From the results related to the students without handicaps, it followed that almost 21% of the students had no hitherto experience with handicapped individuals, 47% indicated exceptional experience, and only 30% had regular contact. An interesting finding may be considered that the experience of students with disabled peers was never entirely negative: 74% of the whole was very positive, while 17% of the cases were conflictual. All of our interviewed UHK students stated that they were willing to help the handicapped, although the range of their idea of assistance varied. Only 19% of them were ready to spend their free time on this activity, while the majority (81%) provides assistance in the form of holding the door, showing the way, etc. 90% of the students, however, considered any contact with disabled people as clearly beneficial: handicapped individuals present a source of new experiences, a clarification of priorities, but also information about them in itself. A content analysis of their responses revealed three principal types: a new experience in the sense of setting a mirror before oneself and a relativization of their own values, the opportunity to learn something new (which is usually motivated by a future profession), and a sense of meaningfulness in helping someone who needs help. The following figure specifies the representation of individual motives:
In contact with handicapped students, an equal amount of positive and conflicting experiences were indicated. The positive emotions that the students most often reported were joy, affection, empathy and a sense of meaningfulness. The most common conflicting feelings were embarrassment and anxiety due to lack of experience. Nearly half as often did the students feel compassion, pain and regret towards their disadvantaged peers. The specific proportions of emotions are illustrated in the following graph:

An assessment of the handicapped using the semantic differential method in terms of nine characteristics comes out generally positive: the arithmetic average on a five-point scale ranges from 1.6 to 2.24. The specific list of assessed characteristics and their graphical and tabular processing is presented in Figure 3:
Among the handicapped group, a positive contact experience with other people at UHK was indicated at 62%, while 38% indicated a diverse experience or conflictual (in terms of affective rating) experience. The most common reasons were ignorance and lack of experience with a disability, which can lead to a lack of sensitivity and discretion during contact. The group of disabled students were also asked about factors that directly complicate their studies (see Figure 4).

The answers are again led by ignorance and lack of experience with a handicap from the teachers as well (39% of cases), followed by the inaccessibility of some university areas (19%), lack of assistive devices in the classroom (12%) and a lack of communication with teachers in the same ratio. Quite a significant barrier, in terms of the relatively large proportion of students with sensory impairments, was also shown to be insufficient lighting in classrooms and a lack of appropriate computer applications. Also, the vast majority of disabled (92%) described their contact with other students as positive and considered it mutually beneficial. This group of students was also presented with a list of bipolar characteristics such as "friendly - unfriendly" through which they were to express their attitude towards their disabled peers. Again, their average responses oscillated in the positive range, specifically in the interval 1.69 to 2.31. The specific list of assessed characteristics is again indicated in the Figure 5:
Fig. 4: The most common sources of complications for handicapped students during studies

- Lack of access to the surroundings: 19%
- Lack of assistive devices: 12%
- Lack of communication from peers: 6%
- Lack of communication with teachers: 12%
- Lack of knowledge and experience with disability: 39%
- Other (lack of explanation): 12%

Fig. 5: Assessment of UHK students by their handicapped peers in terms of 9 characteristics (1- friendliness, 2- awareness, 3- willingness to help, 4- interest, 5- thoughtfulness, 6- altruism, 7- trust, 8- protection/threat, 9- openness)

In order to allow a comparison of attitudes of both student groups, similar characteristics were chosen – in most cases identical, and two in ranges similar. The results of the comparison are presented in Figure 6 (see below):
Fig. 6: Mutual assessment of both UHK student groups in terms of 9 characteristics
(1- friendliness, 2- awareness, 3- courage/willingness to assist, 4- interest, 5- independence/thoughtfulness, 6- altruism, 7- trust, 8- protection/threat, 9- openness)

![Graph showing mutual assessment of both UHK student groups in terms of 9 characteristics](image)

A glance at Figure 6 shows that in terms of individual characteristics, our two groups of students differ in different ways. The largest disproportion was noted for the evaluation of awareness – the group of students without handicap were rated by their handicapped peers as significantly less informed (t = 2.09). Another comparable characteristic was the range of interested – not interested. In terms of this characteristic, the non-handicapped students were assessed by their physically disadvantaged peers as significantly less interested (t = 1.66). Also, mutual openness shows differences at first glance, also confirmed by the Student's t-test (t = 2.34). Students with disabilities were assessed by their peers as significantly more open in contrast to the openness of students without a disability as assessed by their handicapped peers.

4. Exploratory research – method and results

Our investigation confirmed the phenomenon that we had the possibility to observe over the course of the project. The academic environment of UHK is generally rated by handicapped students as more friendly – this group of students does not feel excluded but is rather relatively open to contacts with others and feels accepted. However, in terms of ensuring their access to education, there is still room for improvement. This regards, in particular, the awareness level of the teachers in the special-pedagogical area, barrier-free access to all areas, and a sufficiency of assistive devices in the classroom, where it is still possible to expand the boundaries of satisfaction of our handicapped students.

As for positive findings, we consider it positive that the overwhelming majority of our surveyed non-handicapped students is open to contact with handicapped students and is aware of the possibility of personal profit from this interaction. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of this group of students experiences conflicting feelings in contact with disabled students, mainly due to ignorance and inexperience with these individuals. The students, then, are aware that people with disabilities are part of our society and it is appropriate to support and assist them, but in personal contact they experience embarrassment, not knowing how to react and behaving...
impersonally. In our opinion, it is precisely this that serves as an important reason for realizing intervention programs of various types, especially those based on repeated personal contact with students (and teachers) and their handicapped peers. Our investigation was carried out before the Sharing Experiences program and an analysis of the data re-confirmed its usefulness in relation to the development of self-esteem of everyone involved. In the near future, we consider it useful to carry out a follow-up evaluation in order to compare attitudes before and after intervention and improve the entire intervention program.

Our investigation confirmed some findings already known to us that we had the possibility to observe over the course of the project's realization. It also pointed out facts that are less apparent at first glance. This contribution had brought the first part of the results. We consider the subsequent evaluation of the program to be useful.

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