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THE ROLE OF ACTION RESEARCHES IN CREATING SCHOOL WITHOUT VIOLENCE¹

Abstract: Evaluation of effects of the programme *School without violence* has been completed as an important thing which enables safe stay of pupils at school. It has been done as an action research with the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade pupils at elementary school. General aim of this research is directed towards diminishing violent behaviour by the use of action research and making positive atmosphere, *School without violence*. This process of research had three phases. Programme activities and contents have been created in the first phase of this research programme as well as the organising of the teachers training who have agreed to take part in the project. In the second phase of this action research, activities and evaluation of the process were being done at the same time and in the last phase the final evaluation of the effects of the programme. The results showed that action research can change and improve educational practice with simultaneous, active taking part of the teachers, researchers, critical friends and pupils in all phases of the research. Activities that were completed showed that pupils learn about different kinds of violence as well as about different ways of reactions in these kinds of situations through creative way of work. Special accent in this research was directed towards developing and making constructive solutions in order to resolve conflicts and misunderstandings by talking and also through social dialogue, as well as towards non-violent communication and tolerance.

Key words: action research, violence at schools, aggressiveness, safety of pupils at school, *School without violence*.

Introduction

Violence is very frequent phenomenon in nowadays society; both adults and children are confronted with this problem. In educational institutions, pupils are exposed to different kinds of violence among their friends of the same age, and consequences have impact on victims, bully and the ones who see the scenes of violence. Because of this reason it is very important that all (...) people who are involved in the school life have active and good cooperation in order to protect pupils from violence and to make good conditions

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for their safe growing up (Tomonjić et al., 2009, 46-58). Violence is defined in *Special protocol* as "(...) verbal or nonverbal behaviour which is noticed once or repeated several times and as a consequence has real or potential endangering of children's/ pupils' health, development and dignity" (Posebni protokol, 2008, 8).

Starting point for this research is the problem of violence among pupils who are the same age, finding different models of prevention which will decrease the level of frequency, improve the atmosphere in class and at school as well as the communication among pupils and make optimal conditions for personality development (Konig & Zedler, 2002). Learning, changing and researching of educational practice enables practitioner to reveal the research problem during the process of research (Maksimović, 2010: 189-198). Action researches mean that all sides take part actively; it means that both researchers and the ones who are exposed to the process of research have their own parts (Konig & Zedler, 2002). Action researches are not done on people but with people (Reason, 1994) so talk to the teachers and the pupils helped us to define the problem of research. Action research means that there is an action and research, improvement of the current state by introducing innovations, during the talk to the teachers about actual problems we noticed that they often meet different kinds of violence among the same age pupils at school and they want to find possible way to prevent the violence at school and perhaps to exterminate it.

In this research accent is on prevention of violence among the same age pupils through the programme *School without violence*. This research offered a lot of useful information, constructive suggestions and solutions for all the pupils in order to examine the effects of the programme, *School without violence*; we did the research and we will present the phases involved in each action research: planning, action, observation and reflection.

Starting the action research

Action research is "(...) simultaneous action and research, process of changing practice and constructing knowledge" (Pešić, 1990: 275-277) and in that way it appears in the context of the changes, as a try in resolving developing problems or practical questions. Action research can be defined as a process during which practitioners systematically examine existing educational practice (Maksimović, 2012; Bogнар, 2008; Ferrance, 2000: 4).

In order to complete the action research it is necessary that all pupils agree on being involved, it means that they take part in project of changing the existing practice on their free will and in that way they introduce innovations in their work and educate themselves. One of the most important characteristics of the action research is that practitioners take part in the research while researchers take part in the action. The thing which activates each action research is dissatisfaction with the existing state, necessity for changes by introducing innovations which will advance educational process. McNiff and Whitehead (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002: 56) define action research as a systematic process of observing, describing, planning, acting, reflection, evaluation, modification but these stages don't have to appear consecutively, however it is important to start the research at one place and to finish it somewhere unexpectedly depending on the course

and direction of the process. The phase of reflection and planning includes estimation of existing practice, identification of the subject and the problem of research in details, finding information while the phase of action is characterised by the choice of place and various strategies for getting and analysing data in order to observe all the aspects of research in details. In the last phase, phase of evaluation, we estimate success of this research, to say more precisely influence and feasibility according to the defined aims. Evaluation gives us information for all the participants in the research which enables us to follow the changes continually. We start action research when we define starting values of research which show clear direction and help us to achieve goals of the research. Starting values in this research are: violence, violent behaviour, pupils' safety, aggressiveness, tolerance, prevention and stopping violent behaviour, communication without violence, resolving conflicts, workshops, film presentations, friendly matches. These instructions will help and give us directions how to do the action research properly in order to get relevant data.

Phase of reflection and planning

This phase means evaluation of existing practice, identification of the subject and problem of this research and getting the information. This is very complex and long lasting process and the key thing for researching something is identification of something that will show someone's interests in the time to come. For all these things a certain degree of auto reflection and critical self inquiry are needed. In this phase we were getting data about frequency of violent behaviour among pupils and estimating students capability of recognising violence and reacting in these violent situations.

In order to resolve action research problem it was desirable to take care of more segments. The thing which is of great importance is that the problems are authentic and proposed by practitioners from educational institutions which are important for them and they are in different surrounding. As many agents take part in action researches, problem of this research was identified through discussion between safety team members, pupils at school, pedagogue as a member of the team and at the same time as a critical friend. Agreement was made through discussion, everybody agreed at once that one of the most frequent school problems is exactly safety and sureness of pupils at school which will be realised by educating pupils (5th, 6th, 7th, 8th grade) about harmful effects of violence, possible ways of resolving conflicts and by learning rules to play fair sports matches. There was a question, what kind of a role does action research have in all this, in other words can it stop violent behaviour, in what measure, in what way and what kind of work is needed?

Generally accepted, and the most convenient way of work were: modified workshops for our needs, taken from the project *School without violence* by presenting educative film about violence and friendly sports match between the 6th and the 8th grade pupils. Workshops involve cooperative group work and they contribute to developing knowledge and attitudes, they are adjusted to the pupils' needs and interests and they offer mutual support. Workshops were found at the website: www.unicef.school-without-violence and they were slightly changed and corrected.

Problem of this research is defined in the following form: Which activities and what kind of role has action research in diminishing violence, violent behaviour and aggressiveness among pupils? Which ways, methods and kinds of work can be used as well as what can be achieved by them? Problem of this research showed us the subject of this research. Considering the fact that action research is always related to introducing some innovations in practice and examining their efficiency, topic of this research is to examine efficiency and benefit of the use of action research welfare in creating *School without violence* and making it safe place for pupils.

Having discovered the problem and the subject of research general aim of the research has been defined and directed towards diminishing of violent behaviour by action research and by making positive atmosphere, *School without violence*. Apart from the general aim, the other aims are directed towards education of teachers to do the action research: teacher training; contribution that theory has in action researches, examination of workshops effects in the process of diminishing violence, violent behaviour and aggressive behaviour among pupils, examination of how important fair sports match can be in developing tolerance and cooperative relations among pupils, examination of action research contribution in the process of making school safe and sure place for children.

The following questions helped in realisation of this research and offered topics for discussions: What kind of part do action researches have and in what way they can help to diminish violent behaviour, aggressiveness and to develop tolerance among the pupils and ensure pupils' safety at school? Does book of rules, which is related to pupils' safety and security at school have positive effects in this sphere? Does active participation of all agents in this research contribute to advanced educational process? Do the workshops have effect on developing positive characteristics, attitudes and acceptance of positive pupils' behaviour models? Does watching educative film about violence have influence on developing pupils' awareness about negative effects of violence? Does the fair sport match among different grade pupils contribute to their better cooperation and development of tolerance? What kind of reactions and satisfaction do teachers have when they take part in workshops? How can be developed and advanced successful pupils' communication without violence during the workshops? What was happening at the time the workshops were being completed? Are the teachers trained to use the workshops? Are all the agents included in the research satisfied with the pedagogue's help as a critical friend? Will this research develop teachers' need to use it in order to advance educational practice? Will the teachers share this new experience, which is related to the use of action research, with their colleagues from other schools as an example of good practice?

Action research started at the end of November, 2013 and it was finished at the beginning of February, 2014 at elementary school "Bora Stankovic" in Jelasnica, municipality Surdulica. Sample: 26 pupils included (5th, 6th, 7th, 8th grade).

When we talk about initial state of elementary school "Bora Stankovic in Jelasnica, there is a written *Protocol related to protection from neglecting and maltreatment of pupils at school*, included in the Book of rules of (Pravilnik OŠ "Bora Stanković", 2010) which is obeyed by all people who take part in the school life. The main principles on which the

Protocol is based and which represent directions for action are the following: offering good conditions at school so that children and pupils have life and work which contribute to their optimal maximum development; child's/ pupil's benefit is on the first place in comparison to the benefits that adult employees and other people have in this school; ensuring safety records and protection of child's rights to their privacy; pupil's participation in each phase of the protection process through constant informing, which is always done on time and in an appropriate way for their age and capability to understand different situations, and through expressing their own opinion. Protocol is the same for all children/pupils no matter to their sex, age, family status, ethnic origin and all the other social and individual characteristics (skin colour, language, religion, nationality, capability and characteristics of each child. General aim of this Protocol is to advance the quality of children's and pupils' life by the use of measures for prevention in order to make a safe place for their life and work; measures of interventions in situations of violence, maltreatment and negligence at school and institutions. Specific aims of prevention are: making and cherishing atmosphere of accepting, tolerance and respect; including all groups of interest (children, pupils, teachers, research associates, clerical workers and support staff, headmasters, parents, guardians and local government) in bringing and developing prevention programme; increasing level of awareness and preparing all people included in the functioning of this institution to recognise violence, maltreatment and negligence, defining procedures and actions for protection from violence and reacting in violent situations, informing all people included in the functioning of this institution about procedures and actions for protection from violence and about reacting in violent situations, advancing competences of teachers and other employees, children, pupils, parents, guardians, local community for detecting and solving problems with violence, maltreatment and negligence. Specific aims of this intervention are: the use of actions and procedures for reaction in violent situations, making a system of efficient children's protection in case of violence, constant attention to violence and its frequency as well as estimation of protection programme efficiency, decreasing and removal of consequences of violence and reintegration of a child/pupil into peer groups and the life of institution; advising children/ pupils who are exposed to violence, who do violent things or observe them. The school tasks in enabling realisation of the Protocol principles (Pravilnik OŠ "Bora Stanković", 2010) are the following: creating positive atmosphere at school in order to learn, to develop, to cherish and initiate proper behaviour and personality respect, not to tolerate violence, not to hear about violent actions; to develop responsibility and necessity to react in violent situations.

Realisation of activities and evaluating research process

In this phase of action research activities and evaluation of the process were being performed simultaneously. Action researcher was not limited to use only one strategy so that enabled the use of multi-structural methods of gathering and using data so that researcher can get wholesome insight into some spheres of research. Watching educative film about violence, playing a fair sports match among the 6th and 8th grade pupils, taking part in numerous workshops enabled pupils to be informed about types of violence, possible ways to recognise kinds of violence, to react and protect themselves in violent situations as well as about importance of calm and constructive solutions to the problems, communication without violence, to avoid discrimination and to play a fair

sports match. Pupils took place in all activities and they enjoyed watching educative film about electronic violence, playing game with their friends, obeying the rules. At the beginning of the survey pupils were examined about the things they had previously learnt related to just mentioned things and then after the research having been finished. After each activity pupils did questionnaires in order to be evaluated whether they liked the workshops, whether they helped them to learn something new, to understand and use the learnt things. Teachers and pedagogue in a role of a critical friend actively took part in realisation of planned activities, they kept a diary about observing and informed about what they noticed as well as about the achieved results.

Summative evaluation process effects of the program

During the action research total evaluation of the project was done in order to show advantages and disadvantages. Purpose of this evaluation was to give continuous return information about action research. Evaluation included attending to classes, talking with teachers and pedagogue at school, teachers' discussions, teachers' critical reflection through reports and at the end examination of pupils' attitudes. In order to attend classes we used the method of observation. Evaluation, which was by itself mainly qualitative, gave us precious help in advancing educational practice. Form tutor's classes have been analysed as well as PE and Civic Education classes. Firstly pupils' attitudes about innovations, that programme School without violence offered, were questioned. Then examination was completed one month later. The results after this research showed that pupils started to use the models of programme *School without violence* in order to resolve conflicts and they seriously accepted negative effects of violence.

Pupils' attitudes about completed activities were examined by questionnaires where they had to write down what they liked the most, whether they use the things they learnt ("What did you like the most during this work?, Do you use things you learnt in violent situations? Would you like to gain knowledge in this way, i.e. through workshops?"). Based on the results we got we can conclude that pupils liked this way of work, especially the workshops which included watching educative film and after that discussion about it as well as the fair sport match. Everybody uses what they have learnt in resolving conflicts and they would like to continue with this way of work.

The effect of this action research was examined by self evaluation of the pupils' attitudes about knowledge they had had before the action research and after that (after the workshops). T-test of sample pairs evaluated influence of intervention on the research results of examining pupils' knowledge about violence before and after the action research (situation 1 and situation 2). According the pupils' attitudes and their self evaluation of given claims, it was found that there is a statistically significant difference between the answers given in situation 1 and situation 2 (T-test= 0,000) and they are related to the pupils' acquaintance with the kinds of violence. This shows that real probability is less than 0,0005 and according to that conclusion there is a significant difference in results of pupils' knowledge examination about violence which were got in these situations. Related to that it was found that there is a significant difference and it is needed to find out which results show larger values (in situation 1 or situation 2). Separate average values for both situations are the following: in situation 1 is (M=2,42

SD=0,70) and in situation 2 is (M=4,23 SD=0,42) so we can conclude that these examination results related to pupils' knowledge about violence were better in situation 2 (after the action research) than they had been in situation 1 (before the research). Average increase of knowledge values is (M=1,81), while the interval of 95 percent of trust goes from (1,64 to 1,97).

In statements which are related to reactions in violent situations it is found that there is a statistically significant difference between answers from situation 1 and the ones in situation 2 (t-test=0,000). It means that we can conclude that there is a significant difference in results which were got in pupils' knowledge examination related to violence, which were got in situation 1 and in situation 2. Average value is (M=2,77 SD=0,76) and in situation 2 (M=2,77 SD=0,76) so that we can conclude that the results of the pupils' knowledge examination about their reactions in violent situations were better in situation 2 (after the action research) than in situation 1 (before the research). Average knowledge value increase is (M=1,92) while the 95 percent trust the average interval goes from (1,76 to 2,08).

Statements which are related to knowing efficient ways of controlling anger showed that there is a statistically significant difference between answers in situation 1 and situation 2 (t-test=0,000). We can make a conclusion that there is a significant difference in results which were got in pupils' knowledge examination in the sphere of violence, which were got in situation 1 and situation 2. Average value is (M=3,54 SD=0,81) and in situation 2 (M=4,42 SD=0,50) so we can conclude that pupils' knowledge examination results about the ways of controlling anger became better in situation 2 (after the action research) than in situation 1 (before the research). Average value increase is (M=0,88) while the interval of 95 percent trust goes from 0,67 to 1,69.

Statements which are related to having a particular manner of communication show that there is a statistically significant difference between the answers in situation 1 and situation 2 (t-test=0,000). According to this we can conclude that there is a significant difference in the results which were got in pupils' knowledge examination in the sphere of violence, in situation 1 and 2. Average value is (M=2,04 SD=0,66) and in situation 2 (M=4,92 SD=0,27) so we can conclude that the results, related to knowing a particular way of communication, were better in situation 2 (after the action research). Average value increase of knowledge is (M=0,88) while the interval of 95 percent trust goes from (2,55 to 3,21).

Statements which are related to being familiar with the rules which have to be obeyed in the fair sports matches showed that there is statistically significant difference between answers in situation 1 and situation 2 (t-test=0,003). We can make a conclusion that there is a significant difference in the results of the pupils' knowledge evaluation about violence in situation 1 and situation 2. Average value is (M=3,08 SD=1,16) and in situation 2 (M=4,19 SD=0,75) so we can conclude that the results of evaluation of pupils' knowledge of rules in fair sports matches became better in situation 2 (after the research) than it had been in situation 1 (before the research). Average increase of knowledge values is (M=1,11) while the interval of 95 percent trust goes from (0,41 to 1,81).

Statements that are related to knowing type of electronic violence showed that there is a statistically significant difference between answers in situation 1 and situation 2 ($t\text{-test}=0,000$). We can conclude that there is a significant difference in the results of pupils' knowledge examination in the sphere of violence which were got in situation 1 and 2. Average value is ($M=1,84$ $SD=1,04$) and in situation 2 ($M=4,77$ $SD=0,43$) so we can conclude that the examination results, related to pupils' knowledge about electronic violence, were better in situation 2 (after the research) than they had been in situation 1 (before the research). Average knowledge value increase is ($M=2,92$) while the interval of 95 percent trust goes from (2,34 to 3,50).

Statements related to recognition and protection from dangers on the internet showed that there is a statistically important difference between answers in situation 1 and situation 2 ($t\text{-test}=0,000$). We can conclude that there is a significant difference in the results of the pupils' knowledge examination in the sphere of violence in situation 1 and situation 2. Average value is ($M=2,58$ $SD=0,94$) and in situation 2 ($M=4,11$ $SD=0,32$) which means that the results of the evaluation of pupils' knowledge about electronic violence were better in situation 2 (after the action research) than they had been in situation 1 (before the research). An average knowledge increase is $\Delta M=1,54$, while the 95% trust interval spans from (1.06 to 2.01).

It was determined from claims regarding recognition of the term *discrimination* that there is a statistically significant difference between answers obtained in situation 1 and in situation 2 ($t\text{-test}=0,000$). We may conclude that there is a significant difference in results of inquiries testing pupils' knowledge obtained in situation 1 and between ones obtained in situation 2. Mean value and standard deviation in situation 1 are $M=3,15$ and $SD=0,36$, whereas in situation 2 they are $M=4,61$ and $SD=0,49$, so we can conclude that inquiry results concerning pupils' knowledge about discrimination improved since situation 1 (before research) until situation 2 (after action research was conducted). An average knowledge increase is $\Delta M=1,49$, while the 95% trust interval spreads from (1.25 to 1.66).

In a discussion, in which participants were pupils, teachers and a pedagogue who participated as a critical friend, a consensus about their satisfaction concerning personal participation in workshops, as well as benefits which came along with that kind of approach has been successfully reached. The number of pupils' visits to pedagogue due to reports of inappropriate behaviour, both by pupils themselves and by teachers, has decreased. To the satisfaction of pedagogues it was noted that communication, cooperation and socialization between pupils of different grades, lack of which was one of the problems many pupils often complained about, have been significantly improved. Merger of pupils from different grades, during the realization of these workshops, helped them get to know each other better, form new friendships and gain new experiences which all led to removal of intolerance, often present between pupils from different grades.

Conclusion

Action research is mostly conducted in situations when there is a certain problem which demands solution: often it can be a discrepancy between practical objectives of pedagogical actions and positivistic methodology. Aim of action research is: planning,

applying, monitoring and evaluating an intervention which should improve existing practice or solve a certain problem. It should also encourage participants through the engagement in research, to develop reflexive praxis, to promote equality of democracy, to connect practice and studies and to promote collaborative research. Action research arises in the context of change as an attempt to solve practical issues. This is caused by dissatisfaction with existing situation and by desire to introduce some innovations, all in order to enhance pedagogical and educational practices.

Continuous efforts to take the pedagogical and educational process to a higher level have led to the discovery of the fact that among students there often occur conflicts, intolerance, poor communication, frequent tattling and inability to resolve conflicts peacefully and without violence, all of which require an intervention on a given problem (which indicates that an intervention is needed on a given problem). Based on these observations, a plan for the implementation of a research project was made. It consisted of selected workshops, taken from the project *School without violence* under an organization UNICEF, the organization of a fair play contests between students of sixth and eighth grades, as well as playing of an educational film about violence. Planned activities were carried out with students of fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades, in order to suppress identified problems. The use of action research allows students to become equal participants in the study. Implementation of workshops in teaching activities enables pupils to be fully engaged, also this type of work encourages them to cooperate and provide assistance outside the classroom in their daily lives.

The undertaken activities have helped in meeting the pupils' needs to feel free to express themselves with a help of creative way of working, to learn about the various forms of violence and ways to respond to such situations and protect themselves, to develop and build constructive solutions for resolution of conflicts and confrontations by peaceful means through discussion and social dialogue, nurturing non-violent communication, and tolerance. Workshops, where educational films were used, have had particularly positive effects on pupils. The combination of audio-visual effects provided by the movie, and then the concrete role playing and discussion about broadcasted scenes, allows pupils the activation of a number of senses, and increases pupils' cognitive level to maximum. Execution of fair play match between pupils of sixth and eighth grades, served as a check on how pupils are really capable of applying acquired knowledge in actual practice. Teacher of physical education demonstrated high level of satisfaction, and pointed out that the game is generally performed as planned and that that pupils demonstrated a noticeable efforts to play the game fairly, great satisfaction and desire for this kind of socializing to be arranged a few more times.

This action research has opened up a number of new problems and new opportunities for new action research projects. At this point we can ask the question: What improvements does this project bring compared to current practice in the school? First of all, the school becomes a place where cooperation, collegiality, tolerance, non-violent communication, resolution of conflicts in a peaceful and constructive manner, the absence of prejudice and discrimination are developed and nurtured, all of which contribute to creating a positive climate and safe stay of pupils in schools. Teachers develop competencies, research and creative work, continuity of professional development, change, and evaluation of their own practice. *Team for pupils safety at school* used the workshops that

have been realized in the implementation of action research to enrich its work and included them in team action plan.

It is essential that professional personnel understands that, with this action research, the research circle is not closed, but instead a cyclical process of changing the current pedagogic and educational practice was launched which results in new findings with which we can constantly improve the work of the school.

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