

Initiating teachers' action research: Empowering teachers' voices

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Abstract

The role of a teacher as an action researcher in Croatia is still insufficiently appreciated and promoted in initial teachers' training, school students learning and in the employed teachers' professional post-qualification development. In this country, teachers are most frequently perceived as mediators or technicians whose task is to prepare and implement the tuition based on instructions devised by out-of-school experts. Their role is more artisan-like, being less professional and creative.

To change this situation in his context the author invited 18 teachers from several elementary schools to join and start an action research project with the main question: "How to help teachers to become reflective practitioners and action researchers?" The Project started in spring 2000 and officially finished in spring 2002. Unofficially they have never finished the project.

The author divided the project into two parts. In the first part he organized ten workshops, the aim of which was teachers learning and practicing new skills. They dealt with themes such as confronting the risk of change, reflective teacher, multiple intelligences and the vision of future schools. The author's role during that period was predominant. This fact was in contradiction with his values (particularly with emancipation) but that was in tune with the expectation of a teacher. During that period teachers visited and discussed each other's lessons. The first part of the project was an easier and more appropriate way of professional development for more teachers, but they were less responsible for the preparation and realization of workshops. They participated in previously prepared activities. In the second part of the project they started with teachers' action research projects. While the role of the action researcher was impossible for most members of the community, some of them were able to conduct their action research and improve their practice.

Keywords: Action Research; Emancipatory Education; Teachers' Professional Development; Action Research Mentoring.

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1. My professional background

I started my professional career in the fall of 1987 after two years of study as a teacher in a small elementary school 50 km from Zagreb. I taught students between the ages of 7 and 10 for six years. The school building in which I was working was old and worn but that did not discourage me from creating a school with my 15 students, where children could learn with happiness and not fear. In my teaching I used active learning methods. Students had the opportunity of deciding about everything important that was going on in the school. Despite my wish to improve the quality of my teaching and my initial successes, after two years I lacked new ideas. I also realized how my formal education was only enough for surviving but not for inventing new possibilities. Besides that, since I worked by myself, I did not have professional communications with my colleagues. That is why in 1989 I joined a project of professional development in which some 30 teachers met once a month during two years. At those meetings university professors and other expert educators held seminars, discussions and workshops with an emphasis on different pedagogical topics. We also had the opportunity to attend a one week long international seminar of Waldorf schools. That is when I realized the importance of continued professional development which can motivate teachers to break out of everyday routines by pointing to different possibilities in education. Besides being interesting and high quality professional meetings, meeting my fellow teachers was very important as well. Those meetings resulted in friendship and professional contacts which were my support and additional motivation for creating my personal pedagogical career.

After the project ended I decided to continue my pedagogical study and to improve my formal education. During my study I was exposed to different pedagogical theories, and I dedicated special attention to philosophical and methodological foundations of pedagogical science. After my pedagogy study, which I completed while I was working, I was hired as a school pedagogue in the primary school "Vladimir Nazor" in Slavonski Brod. In my new role as a pedagogue I undertook various tasks, which all pedagogues have to deal. For instance, I was advising teachers, parents and students, and dealing with various administrative, organisational and technical tasks. I also tried to assist teachers with introducing changes, which aimed at breaking from the boundaries of traditional teaching. I believed that the most important factor in accomplishing this task was continued professional development. In spite of the quality of different forms of professional development and teachers' wishing for learning and changes, teaching practice did not change significantly – teaching still retained the form in which teachers were oriented to meet an official program with little effort to develop different children's capabilities and especially their creativity. I realized how transmission of professional information, to which the professional development of teachers is mostly reduced, is not sufficient for true educational changes. That is why I decided to start a project which would, in addition to providing professional information, include a reflective approach in education, improve teachers' capabilities, and assist them in creating their pedagogical visions, plans of changes and questioning their accomplishment based on gathered information. The final aim was to help them in becoming action researchers.

2. Philosophical backgrounds

My professional career can be described as a road with many intersections where I have to make decisions about which path to take rather than taking a one way street that leads to a single destination. I based decisions about which way to go on more or less clear ideas and values. I consider values and philosophical assumptions to be guidelines which assist in making decisions in life. That is why, in the beginning, I would like to describe my philosophical background without explaining it in detail. My philosophical values are as follows:

1. education based on freedom
2. future oriented education
3. emancipatory education

2.1. Education based on freedom

In the West the idea of freedom has its roots in Biblical times. The secular importance of the idea of freedom made gains in modernism. Modernism began with the Renaissance (around 1500) but its focus on self-enlightenment began around 1800. Important historical events that define modernism include the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the French revolution (Habermas, 1988, p. 22). The main characteristic of modernism is that it cannot and will not take its values from another epoch; it has to create its own standards from itself (Habermas, 1988, p. 12).

Any school which does not include the development of individual freedom in its education does not reach this aim of modernism. We can say that it belongs to some other time that should be behind us. Freedom is not conceived as natural education, which was a goal for Jean Jacques Rousseau (2007) for example, but as an effort that would have to come from the participants in the educational process so that a child would leave the world of nature and begin to create its human nature (culture). Education can be based on open communication between a child and an educator. The education process has to be autonomous and cannot be predicted or regulated from outside. All concepts that try to prescribe, program or reform education without respecting the needs of all participants in the education process ignore freedom as an important determinant of modern society. The research below is grounded in these values.

2.2. Future oriented education

Traditional science deals with predicting possible results in existing trends which they often call laws. That is why, even when looking into the future, it deals with the past. Namely, when positivistic science tries to predict the future it actually researches phenomena which occurred in the past. This is unlike, the future orientation that I support, which starts from foundations of the existing culture and creates a movement towards unrealized possibilities, towards the future. It does not evolve from the inertia of a series of events. The unrealized possibilities are reached through the power of creation. This future approach is deeply aware of its involvement and responsibility for the world it creates. It does not look for excuses for problems that it encounters but tries to find possibilities for improvement.

The approach that I support motivates teachers to rethink and improve their performance, to research, accept risks, release spontaneity and encourage communication with children and other participants in the educational process with the goal of achieving an agreement about a shared pedagogical vision and the possibility of its realization (Stoll & Fink, 2000; Ponder & Holmes, 1992). Vision is the seed of an educational process which changes the existing school from its roots. Vision is not a puzzle that can be assembled from elements of an existing picture. It exists only in ideas of its creators, who act autonomously to change the world. Ponder and Holmes considers that vision is an “operating model” not “simply a vague idea of desired end”:

The term “vision” is used to describe a particular phenomenon. A mental image of the possible, a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for an organization, a vision is a target that beckons and compels others to act; it demands change. It is not simply a vague idea of a desired end. Nor is it a clear picture of one, single aspect of an organization. A vision is an operating model of all aspects of the organization and the actual steps necessary to make that model a reality. A vision takes a picture of the whole that is more than a mere snapshot; it reflects on the process of picture-making as well as the end product. (Ponder & Holmes, 1992, p. 2)

For me the “operating model” is the strategic plan and the vision is just a “vague idea of a desired end.” I consider that we should not have precise plans for everything we intend to achieve. In the beginning it is important that we have an idea of our desired end - an idea that we can think out, create, and try out through time. When we have enough experience and if occasions are suitable, we may transform our vision into an operating model, and finally see visible results. My concept of vision is in the range between “general values” and the “operating model.”

Every vision remains a utopia until it is realised in everyday life. Despite the fact that many pedagogical utopias disappear in a clash with reality, it does not mean that they are irrelevant for the pedagogical science. It could be that this reality is overwhelmed with forces which hinder productive ideas. “Should we give up on the utopia or such reality?” (Polić, 2001, p. 49).

2.3. Emancipatory education

The future orientation implies a new role for a teacher who, instead of being a dutiful realizer of someone else’s ideas, becomes an emancipated person:

Emancipation is mostly defined as the predomination of such social relationships and the liberation from such social circumstances which are caused by some forms of human discrimination, i.e. by the loss of rights or by deprivation of rights on gender, racial, national, religious, or some other basis (e.g. age basis, which is on the other hand rarely mentioned). In this manner it is said about gender, racial, national, religious etc. emancipation as the liberation from matching forms of human discrimination. It is surely that the emancipation also means overcoming all forms of human discrimination, but it is more than that. (Polić, 1997, p. 109)

I agree with the former quotation, especially with the statement that emancipation is more than overcoming all forms of human discrimination. For emancipation in its wider sense the following is important:

1. the liberation from our personal limitation which restrains our development;
2. freeing from ideological constraints and addiction to authorities;
3. the development and creative expression of personal capabilities;
4. the establishment of the communication community where we could find interlocutors and participants in the process of communicating our values and creating a shared vision.

The first two points of the emancipation may be termed the *critical elements*, and the last two the *affirmative part* of the emancipation process. Through critical questioning of our own prejudices and ideological constraints of our social environment we provide the solid foundation for affirming our personal and thereby social potentials. It is important that we each take responsibility for emancipating ourselves and others. Emancipation cannot be assumed just as the existence of social rights. Rather emancipation is the active contribution made by each individual member of a community in the process of creating and living his/her personal and social values and visions.

Without emancipated teachers there cannot be free education. A teacher, at best, could be a clerk; a student could be a customer, and education the official work. In this way the aim of education is reduced to getting a certificate (diploma), which is possible to obtain only if the customer (student) fulfils every demand which is given by the clerk (teacher) according to written and unwritten rules of the service. There is no word about creativity, communication and the needs of a participant in that process because that could obstruct or slow down obtaining the main objective – receiving the certificate (diploma).

3. The reflective practicum and action research

I managed to find ways of implementing my philosophical values in my practice and I found solutions, which were almost completely matched. First was Schön's concept of the *reflective practitioner* who actively observes children's behaviour, listens attentively to their thoughts and feelings, notices their capabilities and tries to find adequate methods, which can help their development. A reflective teacher permits her/himself to be surprised with what the child says or does, and manages with these unplanned situations in creative ways by using professional artistry, not one of prescribed methods:

These explanations give the teacher the knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods, the ability to invent new methods and, above all, not a blind adherence to one method but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and that the best method would be the one that would answer best to all the possible difficulties incurred by a pupil. That is, not a method, but an art and a talent. (Tolstoy, as cited in Schön, 1983, p. 66)

Schön considered that this is *teaching in the form of reflection-in-action* which involves thinking about "what we're doing as we do it, setting the problem of the situation anew, conducting an action experiment on the spot by which we seek to solve the new problems we've set" (Schön, 1987b). This is an experiment in which we try to change the situation for the better. For the reflective practitioner approach *improvisation* is much more important than the *deliberate and planned intent to solve particular problem*.

McMahon points out that the reflective practitioner model of teaching and learning “can be used to identify problems, the action research can seek to provide solutions” (McMahon, 1999, p. 168). According to Kemmis and McTaggart action research is:

...a form of collective, self-reflective inquiry that participants in social situations undertake to improve: (1) the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices; (2) the participants' understanding of these practices and the situations in which they carry out these practices. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, parents, workplace colleagues, social activists or any other community members – that is, any group with a shared concern and the motivation and will to address their shared concern. The approach is action research only when it is collaborative and achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (As cited in Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart and Zuber-Skeritt, 2002, p. 125)

McNiff & Whitehead (2002) argue for living theory action research which demands of an action researcher that they place himself/herself (the “living I”) in the centre of an enquiry and recognises his/her living contradictions. The process of social change begins with the personal change of involved practitioners. Action researchers cannot afford themselves to just talk or write about action research. “If they write about practice but do not explain their own they are not engaging with the issues they are speaking about. Contradictory situations arise.” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 25).

Whitehead argues for a living approach to educational theory, which is “growing in the living relationship between teachers, pupils and professional researchers and embodied within their forms of life” (Whitehead, 1989a, p. 3). It is a value-laden practical activity which differs from traditional science approaches as these claim to be neutral or objective. When we experience our values negated in practice we can feel impelled to undertake action to change that situation. Our values enable us to explain why we do what we do. In other words they form our explanatory principles. At the same time values serve as the criteria for assessing the results of our activities (Whitehead, 1989b, p. 3). In the living theory action research approach a very important concept is that of *living contradiction*:

By ‘I’ existing as a living contradiction, I am meaning that ‘I’ hold together values that are mutually exclusive opposites. For example, I experience myself as a living contradiction in those moments when I am conscious of holding certain values, whilst at the same time denying them in my practice (Whitehead, 1999, p. 78).

Whitehead points out that propositional forms of knowledge are communicated through statements while dialectical forms are embedded in, and communicated through, practice. This difference is obvious in the case of contradiction, “In propositional theories, the contradictions are between statements. In dialectical theories the contradictions are experienced in practice” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 80).

McNiff emphasises that the action research operates in cycles or spiral which consist of planning, executing and fact finding (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996, p. 22). But she considers that the real nature of the action research is embedded in spontaneous, self-reflective system of enquiry which cannot be shown and explained by any model which confines that process. The process of action research could not be sequential. “It is possible to begin at one place and end up somewhere entirely unexpected. The visual metaphor I have developed is an iterative spiral of spirals, an exponential developmental process” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 56).

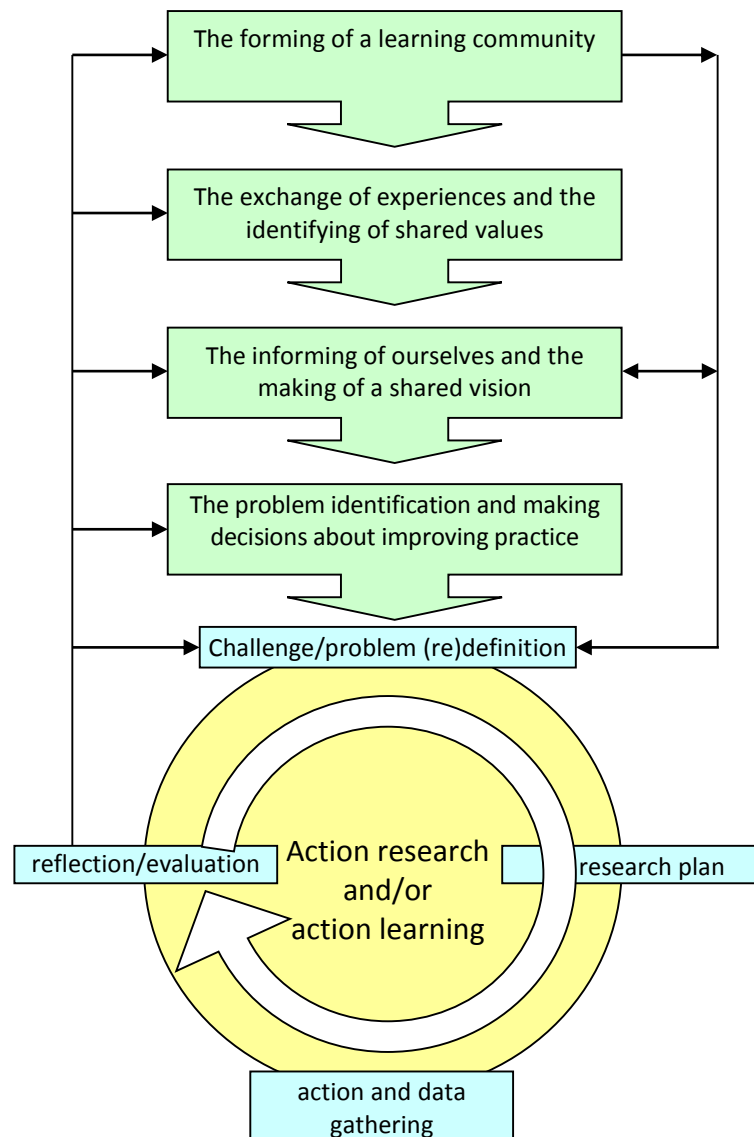


Figure 1. The action research or action learning¹ process

I agree with McNiff that it is not appropriate to create any model of the action research in a prescriptive way, but I also agree with her when she states that action research cycles “are best for helping us to organise the research” (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996, p. 23). Therefore I made my own model of action research cycles (Figure 1) which helped me to organize the project. For me as the participant of an educational process within a learning community, action research is cooperative and communicative acting, which starts from connecting with other people to discuss our experiences, to identify our autonomous values and to obtain a shared vision. It continues with (self) critical questioning of existing conditions and

¹ “Action learning, in brief, is learning from concrete experience and critical reflection on that experience - through group discussion, trial and error, discovery, and learning from and with each other. It is a process by which groups of people (whether managers, academics, teachers, students, or ‘learners’ generally) address actual workplace issues or problems, in complex situations and conditions.” (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, p. 114-115)

identification of problems, proceeds with planning, acting, observing and evaluating educational activities with the main aim to develop our professional skills, to improve our practice and to write, validate and publish our action research accounts. Results of action learning and action research could impel us to redefine our values or vision, to put emphasis on different problems in our practice or to make changes in the learning community. In this project, the learning community split into two smaller groups. Later those communities extended with new members and experienced participants helped novices to conduct their own action research projects.

In subsequent cycles of action research projects it is possible to omit some steps. It is not necessary to start with identifying shared values and making a joint vision, particularly if participants have already discussed their values, and created a shared vision, as was the case in this project.

4. Institutional context

The primary school² of "Vladimir Nazor", where the action research project was realised, is located on the periphery of Slavonski Brod³. Besides the central school building, which is situated in the town, there are five schools in nearby villages. In the school year 2000/2001, when we started the project, it was one of the biggest schools in our town. There were 1,265 students, who were divided into 50 classes, and 83 employees. Students who attend a primary school are from seven-year-old to fourteen-year-old and they are divided into eight grades. In the central school teaching was organised in two shifts: the morning shift lasts from 7:30 to 12:35 and the afternoon shift lasted from 13:00 to 18:05. Students who lived in villages could attend a local school from the first to the fourth grade; after that they travelled by bus to a central school.

Students spent most of their time in regular classes, which were mostly led by one teacher for students from the first to the fourth grade. Students from the fifth to the eighth grades were taught by subject teachers. They had one teacher for each subject. Students spent four to six school hours⁴ in school daily. The weekly norm to stay in school depended on their age. Students in the first grade had to stay in school about 20 school hours and seven and eight-grade students had to spend about 30 school hours. Teachers usually came to school 15 minutes before their teaching started. After finishing classes, they could go home. Teachers had to spend about 22 school hours in school during a week.

Table 1. Number of class teachers and subject teachers

Teachers	Total	Women	Women (%)
Classroom teachers	26	24	92,31
Subject teachers	36	23	63,89
Total	62	47	75,81

² Primary school in Croatia is in the same time compulsory school and lasts eight years.

³ The city of Slavonski Brod is situated in the East part of Croatia that is called Slavonija. It is the center of one of the six districts in Slavonia About 60000 inhabitants live there.

⁴ School hour lasts 45 minutes.

At that time there were 62 teachers (26 classroom teachers and 36 subject teachers) in school (Table 1). The majority of teachers were women (75,81%); that was in accordance with the proportion of female teachers in basic education (76,53%) at the national level (UNICEF, 2011, p. 25). In addition to teachers, there were four professional advisers: a psychologist, a pedagogue, a special teacher and a librarian. A head-teacher is the administrative manager in school and the School Board is the highest collective body for management. It consists of representatives of teachers, parents and the local administration.

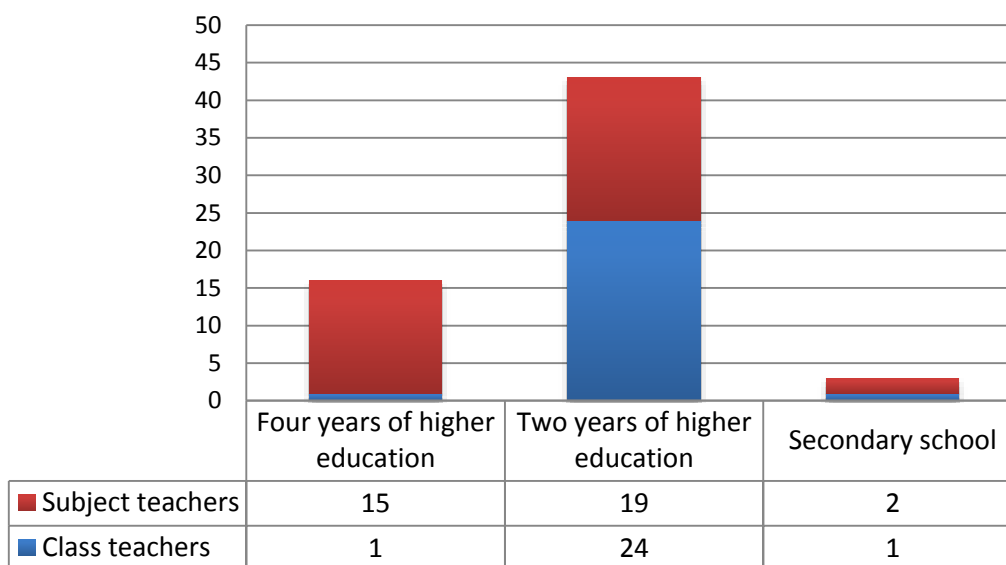


Figure 2. Number of teachers by professional qualification

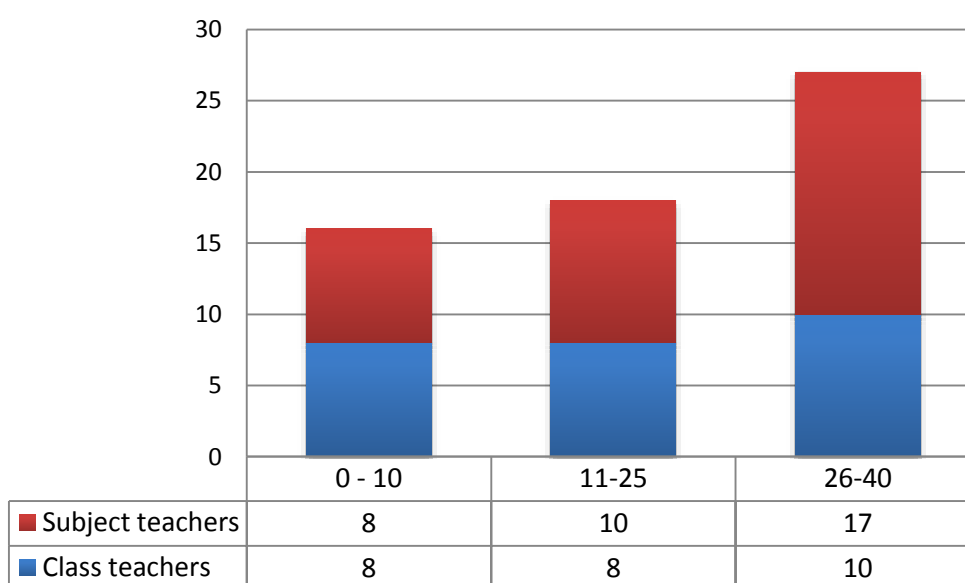


Figure 3. Number of teachers according to professional experience

In the school the majority of teachers had finished pre-service higher education which lasted two years as distinct from teachers who obtained a graduate diploma after finishing four years of professional education⁵. There were few teachers without professional education (they just finished the secondary school) (Figure 2). Teachers who predominated in the school had over 26 years of service. There were equal numbers of younger and middle aged teachers (Figure 3).

In school the following characteristics of teaching were most common:

- the teaching was oriented towards the official program,
- the teacher dominates in the classrooms (she/he lectures, assigns tasks, exams and assesses),
- the teaching was viewed as lecturing,
- classrooms were arranged to match the lecture oriented teaching,
- teachers mostly used the blackboard and chalk in spite of the fact that they had at their disposal other teaching appliances - TV, video, the tape recorder and so on.

The school was well equipped with modern technology (computers, digital camera and the camcorder). All of that equipment was at my disposal during the project.

Teachers have an obligation to participate in their in-service, on-going development. This usually involves individuals attending out of school seminars and reading professional literature. Some of the project participants emphasized that they did not have enough opportunity to go to seminars and if they had, some of the seminars lacked quality.

4.1. Interpretation

Since there were a lot of students we could say that it is a so-called 'mammoth school' in which it is very hard to organise anything else except regular classes. Such a school is more similar to a railway station than to an educational institution which takes care of particular students' needs.

Teachers of female gender predominated in our school. That fact by itself does not mean anything special for the quality of teaching. But the trend of feminisation in the teacher's profession in Croatia has gone shoulder to shoulder with deprofessionalization⁶.

⁵ Starting from 2005/06 and in the framework of implementation of the Bologna process, pre-service training programmes for classroom and subject teachers last five years (International Bureau of Education, 2011).

⁶ Actually, this is not the speciality of Croatian educational system. The problem of feminisation is present in many countries all around the world (UNESCO, 2011) and it is mostly connected with a low level of professional autonomy:

The lack of autonomy among women teachers is clearly reflected in the fact that their work is supervised by school principals and higher authorities, such as school supervisors, public bureaucrats, and ministers of education, most of whom are men, who determine, among other things, the curricular content that must be taught for each subject. The asymmetries of power that are present today in teaching reflect the different social and cultural value given by society to men and women over time. (Cortina, 2006, p. 108)

Men have chosen the professions in which they were paid more and which have provided more opportunities for promotion, while women have tried to find their place in professions, such as teaching, which were less well paid, but which have provided them the opportunity to earn some money and to be a housewife in the same time (Polić, 1993). Therefore, the feminisation of teaching does not help the emancipation of women; rather it contributes to preservation of her traditional role which is mostly connected with the sphere of the family (Baranović, 2011, p. 41). The demands of more professional engagement especially out of the teaching time, tends to influence their teaching in the direction of traditional lectures which is more and more in discordance with the demands of modern post-industrial economy for which quality education represents the beginning of production⁷. The deprofessionalization of education which is partly manifested in feminisation was not a positive circumstance for the realisation of the project which tries to increase the professionalism of its participants.

Figure 3 reveals that teachers had low professional qualifications. It is connected with their age structure (see Figure 4) because in the past the teacher's education mostly lasted just two years. That indicates a deficient level of the teacher's professionalism especially if we know that they were educated to be craftsmen rather than autonomous and creative professionals who strive all the time to improve their own practice. Certainly, that problem was not in accordance with my values.

Material and spatial conditions were advantages rather than obstacles in the project. For the project it was very important to have computers and audio-video equipment at our disposal. We could use these devices for data gathering, analysing and publishing. The school library was the ideal place for our meetings.

Earlier unsatisfactory professional development was the most important obstacle which we wanted to overcome. I understood that for improving teachers' practice it is important to improve teachers' professional development which has to be permanent, consistent, future oriented, oriented to the activity of practitioners, founded on symmetrical communication of attendees, directed to changes and new roles of teachers (e.g. the reflective practitioner, the action researcher), oriented to satisfy their needs and empower them, and creative, participatory, modern and interesting. We wanted to realise some of those tasks through our project.

5. My living contradiction and how could I improve my practice as pedagogue

My role of pedagogue, as professional adviser, has not often been in accordance with my values of: *freedom, future oriented, emancipatory education*. When I started to work as the pedagogue I was confronted with a series of problems which I inherited from my predecessors (two of them were my headmasters). Namely, they accepted and undertook administrative and supervisors' jobs and they expected me to do the same, except that in a big school such as ours there were always various other tasks as well, which someone has to

⁷ At the moment the production much more implies the production of ideas than the production of stuff.

do. My knowledge of information technology was not an advantage to me, but rather an obstacle because I was given new administrative tasks, which my predecessors did not have. At that time I lost my time in dealing with timetables, statistics, servicing the computers, writing letters and reports. In this manner my values were neglected in my practice. Obviously, I was a living contradiction⁸. This project was an opportunity to fully realize my values in practice. I started from the question: *How can I help teachers and myself to undertake, in our circumstances, the new role of the reflective practitioner and the action researcher who is capable of improving one's own practice?*

6. Methods and instruments of data gathering and analysing

Since action research is systematic enquiry it is very important to gather data from various sources. I used various methods of data gathering with the aim to strengthen the study (Patton, 2002, p. 247).

Multimedia recordings: I used VHS camcorder and Dictaphone to record various activities during the project. I made many audio and video recordings of teaching practice, students' activities, interviews, discourses, and workshops. Most of them were digitalized and prepared for computer analysis. As other sources of multimedia data I could mention photos of classrooms, school environment, teachers' and students' activities, meetings of learning community and students' creations.

Qualitative interviews were used to allow participants to express their point of view. Patton outlines four types of interviews: a) an informal conversational interview, b) general interview guide approach, c) a standardized open-ended interview and d) closed quantitative interviews.

- I used the *informal conversational interview*⁹ during meetings at our learning community. I asked participants about various things which were connected with the topic of discourse. I also applied this form of interview after visiting the teaching.
- *The general interview guide approach*¹⁰ was utilised at the end of the first part of the project with a few participants to find out what they think and recommend about the project.

⁸ Certainly, not all my values were neglected. I did many jobs which were in accordance with my values. For example I organised workshops, helped teachers to improve their teaching, helped teachers and students in using the computers etc.

⁹ *"Informal conversational interview* relies entirely on spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction; often as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork... The conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one of more individuals in that setting. Most of the questions will flow from the immediate context." (Patton, 2002, p. 342)

¹⁰ *"An interview guide* lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview... Thus the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within the particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined." (Patton, 2002, p. 343)

- *Standardized open-ended interview*¹¹ was utilised at the end of the project with most of the participants. All interviews were recorded by the camcorder or by the Dictaphone. I digitalized and saved those recordings on CD or on the hard disc of my computer.

Documentation: I used the following documentation as the source of data:

- *E-mails* were used during the second part of the project when I corresponded with teachers who were undertaking their own research. E-mails were shown as an economical and suitable source of data.
- *Reflective diaries* were kept by some of the teachers – action researchers.
- Teachers who undertook their action research wrote *action research reports*. Reports were the important source of data about their understanding of the action research and about the results they obtained.

7. The process of project realisation

7.1. How did we start?

We began the work on the project in the autumn of 2000, but the preparation had begun earlier, in the spring of the same year. I invited each potential participant and explained what she could expect of the project, and what was expected of her. In order to help participants to make the decision about their participation in the project I wrote and distributed the draft of the project in which the theoretical foundation and the plan of action were explained. I encouraged them to express their points of view and their expectations of the project. I emphasized that they were expected to take an active role especially during the action research. Although I consulted with potential participants I made all the preparations alone (consulting literature, writing the draft of the project, organising meetings and inviting potential participant). I did not want to attract a lot of stakeholders; I worked to involve teachers who were ready to take an active part in the project and to improve their own practice. Success of the project depended on the participants' willingness to learn and their awareness that this is a precondition to improving the quality of their teaching. This was consistent with the expectations of some of them:

I'd prefer this way of working. I mean, if I don't learn anything I feel that I somehow wasted my time. I enjoy learning. I don't know what others think. Here today I've learnt something. I do not like that we, teachers, usually talk about children, but I would prefer that we talk about ourselves, that I pay attention on how to improve myself. So certainly, I also teach my children during this process, because I'm a better teacher if I improve myself. (J. Z., personal communication, 3rd March 2000)

Eighteen participants were involved in the project. Most of them were class teachers (12 participants), there were three subject teachers and three professional advisers (one psychologist and two pedagogues). They had between 11 and 25 years of professional experience. Seven of them had less than ten years of professional experience, and two had more than 25 years experience.

¹¹ *Standardized open-ended interview* implies asking the same question to all respondents in the same order. Asking the open questions means that researchers allow respondents to express their point of view. (Patton, 2002, p. 342)

7.2. Interpretation

My dominant role at the beginning of the project was not in accordance with my initial values but it was in accordance with reality. It was hard to expect that teachers, who for years were habituated to taking a passive role in their job, could immediately take an active part with a responsibility for organising their professional development. I was aware that I had to take a dominant role. It was not my aim, but rather the contradiction which I tried to overcome. Therefore, before the beginning of the project I had realised what Whitehead meant by the concept of a *living contradiction*. I also knew that being a living contradiction is not a weakness, but rather the incentive for critical deliberation of the existing circumstances with the aim to improve them. (Whitehead, 1999)

Potential participants did not know much about the theoretical background of the project but they were ready to learn and some of them were prepared to change themselves. We soon realised that for the initiation of the action research project we did not need to bring in external experts but just needed a few well motivated and energetic individuals who could invite others to associate with them with the aim of beginning with learning and changing their practice. Such "invitational leadership involves a generous and genuine turning toward others in empathy and respect, with the ultimate goal of collaborating with them on projects of mutual benefit" (Purkey & Siegel, 2003, p. 4).

In this project the group was not representative of other school contexts. This is not too important for the action research approach where we try to improve our practice, not to generalise some theory outside of one specific context. It just meant that we could not expect changes in wider institutional contexts.

7.3. Plan of the action

We planned to divide the project in two parts: *the reflective practicum* and *action research*. The main purpose of reflective practicum was developing "a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of our performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development" (Osterman & Kottepkamp, 1993, p. 19). In the second part of project the aim was to help teachers in improving their educational practice by using action research.

7.3.1. Plan of the reflective practicum

We planned to realize the following tasks through the reflective practicum:

1. Increasing *readiness for changing* one's own practice – this includes taking the risk of possible negative results (Carter & Curtis, 1994; Craft, 1997).
2. Improving the *teaching artistry* – their spontaneous reactions in unplanned teaching situations (Fish, 1997; Schön, 1983).
3. *Child oriented teaching* – finding sense and meaning in children's activities, the identification of their needs and capabilities (Armstrong, 1994; Carter & Curtis, 1994; Miljak, 1996).
4. *Identification of teachers' values* (Anderson, 1997; Stoll & Fink, 2000).
5. *Informing about various educational theories* and comparing them mutually.

6. *Critical deliberation of teaching activities* with the aim of improving them continuously.
7. Enabling teachers for *data gathering* in their professional practice.
8. Creating shared *educational vision* (Stoll & Fink, 2000).

The initial purpose was not to find solutions but rather to identify problems and to determine a shared vision from which we could start planning action research projects, the aim of which would be to find solutions for some identified problems. We planned to work on specified tasks through about ten workshops during the first semester of school year 2000/2001. We intended to maintain our meetings two times in a month. As well as workshops, we had a reciprocal arrangement whereby teachers visited each other's lessons. My intention was to initiate the role of *critical friends* which is important for the action research process.

7.3.2. Plan of practitioners' action researches

We planned to identify the focus of the action research after developing a shared vision and critically appraising the existing circumstances in our schools. In that part the project participants' role should have been more active both in planning and realisation of the project tasks. We intended to jointly gather data. Our plan was that each of the participants got a draft of the plan before they started their action research. This part of the project should last from March to June of 2001.

7.4. The process of realization of reflective practicum

We initiated the reflective practicum at the beginning of October 2000. At that time we ran the first workshops with the main topic "Coping with risk of change". The last workshop was held at the end of February 2001. During that time 10 workshops (see Table 2) were run and 9 critical friends' visits to observe teaching were arranged.

Table 2. Schedule of workshops during the reflective practicum

Workshop's topic	Date of realization	Type of data
1. Coping with risk of change	11 October 2000	Video recording
2. Data gathering	25 October 2000	Video recording
3. Teachers' values	8 November 2000	Video recording
4. Teachers' artistry	22 November 2000	Video recording
5. Importance of children's independence	6 December 2000	Video recording
6. Without defined topic	20 December 2000	Video recording
7. Child oriented teaching	17 January 2001	Video recording
8. Critical consideration of various theoretical approaches	31 January 2001	Video recording
9. Critical analysis of existing school	14 February 2001	Writing material
10. Vision of future school	28 February 2001	Participants' records of vision and audio recording

The video recordings (<http://youtu.be/5cCX3c5U-Xo>) and photos (Figure 4) are intended to show you that workshops started with the informal association between participants. They were joking, chatting and drinking coffee or juice.



Figure 4. Informal association of participants at the beginnings of workshops

At the end of the project I asked the participants the following question: “If you should imagine that you need to describe what did occur in the first part of our project – during the first ten workshops. What would you say to them?” They pointed out that for each workshop one actual theme was prepared in advance about which they discussed. After the discussion they divided in groups and dealt with tasks connected with the topic of that workshop. Spokeswomen presented what they did and we finished our meetings with discussion.

Participants had the opportunity to say what they wanted, and to hear what others thought about the particular theme. Most of them considered that the communication was free and that what was favoured was the pleasant and relaxed climate. Most felt nice, relaxed, free, cheerful and unburdened but not all of them. V.S. was confused at the beginning and I.K. was unmotivated.

I don't know, we were relaxed in a pleasant atmosphere; we discussed everything openly, and at the same time practiced to listen and respect different ideas, criticize constructively, make propositions – maybe some improvements or expansions of particular ideas. We were relaxed, unburdened and free at our meetings and conversations. (Z.S. – class teacher, personal communication, January 2002)

I would say that I felt cosy at these workshops. (J.Z – class teacher, January 2002)

My feelings were divided. I felt responsible for maintaining planned activities and sometimes I was overburdened, but at the same time I was pleasantly surprised by the teachers' willingness to regularly participate in the workshops. Before the end of first part of project I became dissatisfied with my dominant role and the lack of teachers' responsibility for maintaining and developing activities.

Workshops were educative for most participants, since they could hear something new and exchange experiences with co-workers. Themes were vitally important and enabled connection of theory and practice. Participants said that my role was dominant. I dictated tempo, prepared and led meetings. They pointed out that I informed them about literature which they could not acquire. They respected me as the expert – a person on a higher

professional level. For V.S., I was pretty demanding because I expected them to invest additional effort.

It was very interesting companionship with you as a leader who always came with clearly determined tasks. (D.L. – class teacher, personal communication, January 2002)

At each workshop we were discussing different topics which were prepared in advance and each of them was supported by some extracts from the theory books of the authors we haven't heard of or couldn't find, and they were, dealing with modern school and relationship between students and teachers. (R.S.- subject teacher, personal communication, January 2002)

However, there you were... Not you, then our facilitator, if I talk to somebody else, who was really, well, absolutely at some higher level and he experienced much more than we did, but we bravely tried to follow him and to become involved, write, draw and after that looked what we drew. (V.S. – class teacher, personal communication, December 2001)

A common experience of that part of the project was described by participants with such words as: *interesting, concrete, useful, educative, dynamic, supported with materials and attractive*. Most of the teachers were very satisfied with such forms of professional development:

Firstly, I certainly would, since it's still fresh in my mind, (say) that for me, the most acceptable, the most interesting, the most useful form of (the professional) development is that which we had at our meetings, companionships with other teachers from different schools... It's most relevant because there one can exchange their experiences; understand what others do. That is the form of (the professional) development which I prefer.

I also read literature, some newspapers... but it is not so effective and does not have such impact on my work as that (our project)... Here my work is practically connected with changes which I have achieved, and changes which others have achieved. It's the ideal way of the professional development. (V.S. - class teacher, personal communication, December 2001)

But there were some opposite opinions. I.K. could not completely accept part of the project because everything was not clear to her. She pointed out that some of her friends also shared her opinion. Therefore, they were not motivated enough to participate. V.S. was disturbed with the fact that the leader was well-informed, and others were uninformed so she had to strive to comprehend what was expected of her. Until then, she had been used to being given exact directions and being told what to do, which were not present, so she was confused.

The most important result of that part of the project was our shared educational vision (Table 3) which we created during the last workshop. This workshop was attended by 11 participants. At the beginning of the workshop two teachers (M.Z. and B.B.) informed us about the occasion when they visited their ex-students who were in higher grades (fifth grade). They requested their students to write an essay about their vision of the future school. B.B. read several students' works to us.

Table 3. Teachers' shared vision of the future school*

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|--|---|
| <p>1. Curriculum planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students and teachers together arrange their work. • There exists the possibility of choosing issues and level of knowledge acquiring. • Obligated program is around 50-60% and the rest means creative agreeing with parents, social environment and children. • Freedom of choosing issues and ways of teaching. <p>2. Orientation towards child's needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School beginning from child's needs. • Child-oriented, not textbook and content-oriented approach. • Intrinsic motivation. □ <i>School should not be obliged – students attend school according their needs.*</i> <p>3. Teaching methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning and teaching is realised in the accessible way. • School which develops researching teaches through play, educates a person, and forms versatility. • Thematic teaching without strict division into subjects. • Teaching outside the classroom. • Modern teaching methods. <p>4. Observing and assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School without assessment – just observing the interests and achievements. • Self-assessment. <p>5. Teaching equipment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding compulsory textbooks – independently choosing the knowledge sources. • Modern teaching technology (ICT). <p>6. Material conditions of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material side for students and their teachers is satisfied. <p>7. Organisational and professional conditions of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small classes – about 20 students. • A complete professional team. • Students' groups with equal capabilities. □ <i>Flexible working hours.</i> <p>8. Developing the teachers' professionalism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers work with love. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers make arrangements, cooperate and change unsatisfied circumstances. • A teacher competence – professionalism. • Permanent professional development for the quality of teaching. • Openness of teachers. • Teachers enjoy and feel a sense of happiness through their working. • Teachers are dedicated to their work. • Schools with equal number of teachers both genders. • Possibility of promotion for everyone who wants that. □ <i>Teachers without vices.</i> <p>9. Partnership between school and family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School as continuing of family education and re-education in some circumstances. • Better cooperation between teachers and parents. □ <i>Teachers spend summer or winter vacation with parents and students.</i> <p>10. Quality control of teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficiently measures against rude and unprofessional behaviour towards students. • Students' opportunity to choose a teacher. • Eliminate the outside monitoring of teachers. • Better evaluation of work. <p>11. School management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headmasters who are educated to work with people. • Relationships which are grounded on leadership qualities, not on control and coercion. <p>12. Human relations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual appreciation between teachers. • Solving problems and conflicts by agreement and in a cultural way. • Spontaneous human relations. □ <i>Warm human relations.</i> <p>13. School climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic arrangement of the classroom to be as the family home. <p>14. Overall values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom, responsibility, teachers and students creativity, independence, critical and self-critic, tolerance, consistency, democracy, modernity, innovative, comprehension, freedom of biases, respecting of personality and individuality. |
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*The statements about which teachers could not agree are written with italic font.

The main activity was realized in a variant of the Delphi technique¹². In our approach, participants were asked to write desirable characteristics of the future school, unlike the “standard” procedure that focuses on predicting the future. Each teacher was asked to write their own vision and to explain why that was important to them. They were asked not to talk, just to write. After they had finished the writing I read their notes without mentioning their names and R.S. (subject teacher) recorded their visions on a sheet of paper. Participants did not comment on the ideas presented, they just listened. When all ideas were written, participants again wrote their visions which could be expanded with the ideas of other teachers. They were asked to write an explanation when they omitted ideas. That procedure was repeated five times as long as the participants agreed about the most part of the shared vision.

After the vision was finished we continued with the conversation about possibilities of its realisation. V.S. (class-teacher) asked: “Who can our snowball, which we made, turn into an avalanche?” I answered that we should not expect somebody else to work towards the vision we had created for ourselves. I also emphasised the importance of making public our research which, as well as sharing the knowledge we have created, can also send a message to other people, inviting them to join us and cooperate in similar projects. M.Z. said that she only partly agreed with me because she thought that V.S. wanted to say that somebody “above” has to do something to start that “avalanche”. V.S. said: “Exactly.” I said that we could present our ideas at professional meetings, publish texts in professional journals, participate in different projects and cooperate with similar groups both at home and abroad. K.J. agreed with me but M.Z. said: “We are too lazy to do that (writing).” At the end of workshop I emphasized that the realization of our vision is a very hard job and requires continual work on oneself.

7.5. Interpretation

The reflective practicum was provided through 10 workshops. For most teachers it represented the opportunity to associate with their colleagues in a pleasant atmosphere and to talk about professional topics. At our school where the professional development was pretty neglected and contacts between teachers are reduced to short conversations in hallways or in the staff-rooms, it is completely understandable that it was a new and pleasant experience and opportunity for continuing professional development for most of the participants. Hargreaves considered that for the improvement of teaching:

...the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers must no longer be restricted to occasional, out-of-school courses for the individual practitioner, but must be set in the context of the school as a whole and a concurrent development of both organisation and staff in which teacher development is fused with their everyday practices. Thus it is that teamwork among teachers, mutual observation and support, action research projects based in classroom life, and similar activities blend CPD and the school as a learning organisation. (Hargreaves, 2004a, p. 79)

¹² “The traditional Delphi process used in scenario forecasting can be employed in generating alternatives in much the same manner as individual brainstorming. In the Delphi process a questionnaire, based on some perception of a situation, is mailed or otherwise communicated to experts in the field. Their individual responses are collected, and summarized, and the summaries are returned to each expert with instructions to revise his or her responses as necessary... This is an excellent technique for pooling the ideas of geographically separated experts. All participants have an equal chance to make a contribution, and the ideas are judged on their merits, not on their sources. Moreover, ideas are not influenced by individual or group persuasion.” (Higgins, 1994, p. 135)

An important goal of this project phase was creating communities of practice¹³ with the aim of supporting teachers' learning, and to connect this learning with their everyday practice. It would be even better if we were able to organise this way of professional development for all, or at least for most of the teachers in the school. Since at that time it was not possible, I decided to invite just a group of teachers in the hope that it could form a kernel for the more extensive school changes in the future. However, I believe that the existence of a community of practice is a crucial precondition for creating sustainable continuing professional development at a school level.

In Croatian schools establishing and leading communities of practice could be the responsibility of pedagogues who, among other duties, deal with professional development at school level. Along with a head teacher, almost each school has at least one professional adviser, usually a pedagogue. Head teachers are elected by school boards, which are strongly influenced by local authorities and political parties. As a result they do not have much autonomy and they mostly appear to rely on control and mastering the context. This is unlike a pedagogue's professional role, which requires a university diploma and is not temporary (it is permanent job). Although, I cannot corroborate my claim with research data my impression was that head teachers at that time were mostly managers who rely on control and mastering the context. I suggest that pedagogues could take the role of leader more easily than head teachers. The role of leader and manager, according to Bennis (2009) are significantly different (Table 4). Recent research shows that 85% of teachers perceive pedagogues as professionals who have a significant impact on the whole school life. This current view represents a change when compared to the traditional perception of pedagogue as a head teacher's right-hand person (Brnić & Jurković, 2012, p. 32).

Table 4. Differences between leaders and managers (Bennis, 2009, p. 42).

Manager	Leader
The manager administers.	The leader innovates.
The manager is a copy.	The leader is an original.
The manager maintains;	The leader develops.
The manager focuses on systems and structure.	The leader focuses on people and culture.
The manager relies on control.	The leader inspires trust.
The manager has a short-term view.	The leader has a long-term perspective.
The manager asks how and when.	The leader asks what and why.
The manager has his eye always on the bottom line.	The leader has his eye on the horizon.
The manager imitates.	The leader originates.
The manager accepts the status quo.	The leader challenges it.
The manager is the classic good soldier.	The leader is his own person.

¹³ "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis... These people don't necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems." (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002, p. 4)

The manager does things right.

The leader does the right thing.

My role was crucial for the realization of the project. Planning, preparing and leading workshops were completely my responsibility. Other participants just took part in prepared activities. In that way the project realisation was not in accordance with my values. I supposed that they would take a more active and responsible role in their own professional development. However, I suppose that insisting on the responsibility of all members, which is the most important precondition of collective style of group leadership (Dimpleby & Burton, 1998, p. 111-112), could cause mess, anarchy, and maybe withdrawing from the project. I believe that taking the role of invitational leader could be necessary for maintaining the process in its very beginning. But it should not become the aim, just a transitional period until the improvement of teachers' professional abilities occurs. However, in my experience change cannot happen without crises and difficulties so if there were not many problems it may mean that nothing important was changed. Changes in school require personal engagement about something that we want to improve. If we wait until a situation becomes "ripe for change", we could wait forever.

Various authors emphasize the importance of a shared vision as one of the preconditions for school improvement (Dryden & Vos, 2001, p. 151; Fullan, 1991; Sammons et al. in Hopkins, 2001; Stoll & Fink, 2000). "Visioning is a journey from the known to unknown, which helps create the future from a montage of facts, hopes, dreams, dangers and opportunities" (Scott, Jaffe & Tobe, 1993, p. 3). Working together to create a shared vision is the core aspect of a future approach on which I based this research. The future approach requires generative learning which expands our ability to create:

Shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning. While adaptive learning is possible without vision, generative learning occurs only when people are striving to accomplish something that matters deeply to them. In fact, the whole idea of generative learning—"expanding your ability to create"—will seem abstract and meaningless until people become excited about some vision they truly want to accomplish. (Senge, 1994, p. 191)

Although it was apparent that making a shared vision is an important step in the change process it was not clear how to obtain it. The shared vision cannot be common if it does not originate in a process of developing agreement where each participant can present his/her particular vision. Presentation of particular visions does not guarantee democracy, because it could be easily transformed into lightly accepting the ideas of those participants who are most influential or just the loudest. Therefore I decided to use a face-to-face variant of the Delphi method, which is a simplified procedure that preserves feedback to the participants, their anonymity and repetition of process (Dick, 2000; Morrison in Cohen et al., 2000, p. 237-238).

We organised the vision-building process at the end of reflective practicum to avoid trying to agree a shared vision too early. Fullan emphasises that vision and strategic planning come later for two reasons:

First, under conditions of dynamic complexity one needs a good deal of reflective experience before one can form a plausible vision. Vision emerges from, more than it precedes, action. Even then it is always provisional. Second, shared vision, which is essential for success, must evolve through the dynamic interaction of organizational members and leaders. This takes time and will not succeed unless the vision-building process is somewhat open-ended. Visions coming later does not mean that they are not worked on. Just the opposite. They are pursued more

authentically while avoiding premature formalization. Vision come later because the process of merging personal and shared visions takes time. (Fullan, 1997, p. 42)

Such a way of coming to a shared vision resulted in diverse suggestions and participants' activity. Participants agreed about most elements of the vision, but not all. I consider that it is not important to insist on agreement about each part of the shared vision because the vision is just a sign post which we put up to lead us on our journey towards changes. In this matter the vision is not a strict agenda but it is a provisional notion liable to critical questioning and modification. Later, in the process of change, those ideas which in the beginning were in the minority could be fruitful and acceptable for most participants.

The shared vision only lists the desired ends which cannot be realised if the teacher is not ready to take the responsibility for changes in the process. From our conversation it is obvious that it was not clear to the project participants. They were not ready to take the responsibility for the realization of their vision, because they expected somebody else ("above") to do that instead of them. This expectation indicates that authoritarian patterns were still very strong. It was the most important obstacle to quality and autonomous changes. Other possible explanations of their rejection of the responsibility for change could be connected with their sense of empowerment (Stoll & Fink, 2000). The teacher could not get that sense just through participation in this project. Empowerment depends on school culture which has to be oriented on critical reflection and changes (Bruner, 2001; Day, 1999; Stoll & Fink, 2000). Since this climate did not exist, participants felt that realisation of their vision would be hardly achieved. In spite of that I consider that the existing traditional context could not be changed without the individual efforts to make things different.

In spite of some disadvantages the first part of the project was an interesting and pleasant way of having professional meetings where teachers could say what they think, exchange ideas and learn something new. They also developed a shared vision that was a good starting point for defining action research focuses in the next project phase. In that case problems which they would choose to improve belong to a bigger picture of a desired future.

7.6. Realization of practitioners' action researches

7.6.1. Beginning of the action research process

The second part of the project was started on 14th March 2001 with the topic "Identification of problems". In that part of the project we realized 20 meetings of the researching team, and five teachers finished their action research projects.

At the third meeting, which was held on 4th April 2001, I invited participants to write down what they knew or thought they knew about action research and to ask whatever they wanted to know. After they finished writing I made a presentation about what I know about action research and at the next meeting I distributed a summary of my presentation.

At the beginning I pointed to the problem of my domination in the first part of the project and suggested that we share the facilitator's role. Teachers agreed with that so J.Z. and Z.S. took responsibility to prepare the next meeting. We agreed that they would prepare something about child-oriented teaching. A few days before that meeting I telephoned J.Z.

to ask what was going on. Z.S. was with her. J.Z. answered that they talked things over with each other. I offered help but Z.S. rejected my offer. J.Z. was not sure but she did not insist.

The meeting¹⁴ started with a delay because Z.S. and J.Z. were late. When they came they said that they could not agree how to *conduct* this meeting. J.Z. said that everyone could say what he/she thought, because if they just said what they thought they were concerned that others might be feel they were imposing their point of view. Z.S. did not agree with that. M.Z. wanted them to say what they had and we would say what we wanted but we did not find out their point of view, except that J.Z. wished to talk about the need for power (Glasser, 1992), and Z.S. wanted to organize work in pairs or groups where everyone may say what they think about particular needs.

After that I again took responsibility for the facilitation of our next meeting where they should consider what they could improve in their practice. At the following meeting they could not agree about the topic of their research. Half of them wished to research something about children's play and others wanted to deal with the development of a school which satisfies children's needs so we broke into two groups.

The group which decided to research possibilities of satisfying children's needs gathered on 23rd May 2001 to plan their research. M.Z. was the facilitator of that meeting. In the informal part of the meeting the participants complained about the overloading and a lack of time. One teacher announced she did not want to continue participating in the project. At the beginning I commended M.Z. because she sent me her plan by e-mail. In her text she emphasized the problem of the official duties and her wish to satisfy children's needs. She realised that they represent opposite sides and she could not completely satisfy both of them:

Yesterday some of my students wanted to show me their dance improvisation. While they danced, most of other children carefully listened and swung on the spot in rhythm of song. At the end they, surely, applauded and were very satisfied. What would I write to school book? (M.Z., personal communication, 23rd May 2001)

I said that her text was not yet an action research plan, because she did not concretise what she wanted to improve but it was a very interesting kind of reflective diary. M.Z. asked other participants what they prepared for this meeting. Nobody completed anything; they just made excuses. J.Z. said that she felt how our project was diluted during several previous meetings.

I proposed we stopped making excuses and put forward the suggestion that someone should prepare an icebreaker to enable participants to go through one cycle of the action research process and then the others would say: "It is not so hard, we could do it", or they would say: "It is too complicated, we couldn't do this." M.Z. said that she knew what the main problem was: "Branko, I know what the problem is, you know, because I know what the essential problem is. We don't have the idea where to start and how to start." (M.Z., personal communication, 23rd May 2001)

Z.S. said that for a long time she felt she did action research but she did not write anything. M.Z. agreed with her and said that the action research is not anything new

¹⁴ 25th April 2001.

because “any ordinary teacher is an action researcher because he/she always thinks about new things” (M.Z., personal communication, 23rd May 2001). I emphasized that action research is the systematic enquiry of educational activities and because of that it is different from ordinary teaching.

At the end of the meeting J.Z. and M.Z. declared that they would undertake their action research projects. Z.S. said she would not promise anything. A.B. complained that she had to deal with enrolment of new students and others did not say anything.

7.6.2. Interpretation

If I should name previously described meetings, their title could be “Developmental crises”. ‘Developmental crises’ were evident, for instant, when teachers could not, or would not, take an active role in preparing and facilitating our meetings and independently think out and research their practice. Worst of all, except for five teachers, nobody was ready even to try to undertake an action research project. Instead they found reasons to do nothing, or they complained that the project was diluted, or blamed me saying I did not explain to them enough or tell them what to do.

What had I learnt from these problems?

1. Teachers, who were not ready to start developing their action research, predominated in the group. Therefore the group lost the main purpose, which was to support participants in their efforts to continue with their action research. On the contrary, its influence was discouraging even for the teachers who had the intention to actively participate in the action research.
2. Meetings of the group and discourse provided shelter to participants who were not ready to take an active role in that process. They just hoped that somebody would prepare something. If someone was asked to contribute to the project they made excuses for not being actively involved, for instance saying they did not know what to do or that they did not have enough time.
3. In our case, participants, including me, really did not know enough about what we should do because it was our first action research project. Also, in Croatia at that time, the action research approach in a school context was not appreciated well. Therefore, it would be advisable that in each group, which starts an action research project, at least one experienced action researcher is involved.
4. Each of us could take responsibility for some professional role such as facilitation of professional meeting or realisation of action research, which we are professionally and personally capable of. However, even when someone has the best of intentions to do something, success in dealing with this will depend on the level he/she has reached in her/his individual and professional development. But we could always take the responsibility for learning to improve our capabilities, which is necessary for developing our professional role.
5. The realisation of the action research takes a lot of time so it is not suitable to start these projects close to the end of the school year, as we did, or at a time when the participants are overburdened with other tasks or worries.

6. Barica Marentic-Požarnik (1993) claims that low levels of personal responsibility are evident in professional development situations in which lectures with little discussion, detailed instructions and 'exclusively right' approaches prevail. This was the case in our group.
7. My expectation that my role of facilitator would be of lesser importance in the second part of the project showed up as an unrealised wish. Rather, my role was more important than before. I realised that none of our team members could carry out their action research without the assistance of the mentor. I agree with Sue Johnston's (1994) statement that "action research will not occur naturally and thus needs such external stimuli or incentives to provide the momentum for its incorporation into teachers' routines" (Johnston, 1994, p. 42).
8. I also agree with Sue Johnston that potential barriers preventing the teacher's initiating of action research include: *institutional separation of educational research and practice, absence of critical inquiry approaches in both educational research and practice, lack of time, lack of research skills.* (Johnston, 1994, p. 42) In our case, we faced two new barriers: *absence of the action research approach in Croatian universities and schools and lack of literature about action research in Croatian.*
9. Initiating of action research has its emotional dimension which was sometimes in opposition to self-confidence and resoluteness recommended in critical-emancipation philosophy. It appeared that participants of our project were mostly confused, hesitant and they hardly took responsibility for obtaining their action research projects. However, regarding emotional aspects of this part of an action research process Hargreaves pointed out that change and emotion are inseparable:

Each implicates the other. Both involve movement. Change is defined as "movement from one state to another," while emotion comes from the Latin *emovere*, meaning "to arouse or stir up." There is no human change without emotion and there is no emotion that does not embody a momentary or momentous process of change. (Hargreaves, 2004b, p. 287)

Since the main aim of action research is changing a practice, this means that it stirred an emotional process. The question is which emotions prevail? From this question and later experiences I could conclude that initially negative feelings prevailed (e.g. fear, hesitation, confusion, reluctance, dissatisfaction, guilt, powerlessness) and later, particularly at the end of action research mostly positive emotions prevail like adventurousness, enthusiasm, satisfaction, meaningfulness, worthiness, and pride.

7.6.3. *The action research mentoring*

I continued to cooperate individually with teachers who decided to carry out their action research projects (J.Z., V.S., M.Z. and D.L.¹⁵) through individual conversation and e-mailing. M.Z. sent me her first serious contribution on 21st May 2001. It was her reflective diary where she described one day in her practice. At the end she explained why she kept a record of her practice.

¹⁵ Z.S. decided to obtain her action research alone without my help.

It is obvious that I described one working day in my first grade. Why did I describe all of that and which is connection with the action researches? I want to identify what is happening now and what is the source of my dissatisfaction. We decided in our group about the needs of a child and I think what we officially realize does not satisfy the needs of children and does not satisfy my vision of school. (M.Z., personal communication, 21st May 2001)

She defined what she wanted to improve in her practice: "How could I satisfy the needs, discover and improve multiple intelligences of individual students?" (M.Z., personal communication, 21st May 2001). She also wrote down what she planned to do and how she would gather data:

What could I do in respect to children's needs within the framework of multiple intelligences? I'll write (officially) one thing and do another until circumstances were not changed. It dissatisfies me, but I'll try to keep those feelings under control.

- I'll continue to expand the range of my teaching strategies with new strategies of cooperative learning and development of critical thinking – diversity.
- Clearly define differences between teachers with regard to learning style: cooperation with parents.
- Develop the self-confidence.
- Motivate students to recognize their capabilities in particular types of intelligence.
- Improve the solving of problems and critical thinking through a question of higher order.
- Organize various activities at the school while listening attentively to students.
- Continue with present arrangement of classroom.
- Enable students to plan their time.
- Continue with the practice of expressing one's own opinions and decisions with clear explanation of one's own attitude.
- Permit students to think or work in a different manner if they have clear reasons and if that does not distract the rest of students. (M.Z., personal communication, 21st May 2001)

She planned to gather the following data: *audio recordings of some parts of teaching, informal conversational interview about students' attitudes, opinions, activities and teaching, group interview, reflective diary, critical friend's records*. I responded:

Super!!!! Finally someone succeeded to write a few pages of coherent text which is a great step to elaborate on action research. Frankly, I really have sweated in the last few days and I started to doubt everything what we do. It does not seem to me that it is too complicated for some teachers, who want to change something in their work, to write a few pages of text according to the defined model: what we recognise as the problem, what we think that could be done and how we gather data. Some of our teachers show lack of systematisation, self-incentive and self-confidence. They simply cannot go over the abyss which divides us from being professional in our vocation. I'd like to encourage you in your ideas and I have to say that you have made my day and a whole month. And here are my thoughts about your letter:

The action research means systematic approach in all parts so it is not wrong that you also write, apart from your present experience, what you know about the topic, which you intend to deal with, from literature or different seminars – it means that you should give theoretical presentation of the theme you intent to research. The elaboration of your plan should be more concrete. Maybe at the beginning, you should not take too much activities, elect something from your plan, but specify what you intend to do (e.g. if you want to enable the

students to make a plan, you should say what you exactly mean by that or if you intent to motivate students to recognise their abilities within the framework of multiple intelligence then you have to say how you plan to do this).

Except the plan of activities (what to do) there should be the schedule (when to do that). After that you should plan data collecting. Clearly, you should not quantify satisfaction or dissatisfaction, but you may recognise it and in communication with children determine to what extent they are satisfying. Duration of action research circle depends on your plan what to do. If you plan to register some changes till the end of the school year, then your circle lasts one month, or less. It is important to start with the first circle of the action research, break ice and serious results will emerge in forthcoming circles.

Any way you are at the right track and just go on!!!!

I expect that we continue with the communication such as this and I go on with our project with more confidence. You are the first icebreaker in our group. It might not be easy for you, but I believe that you have bravery and mind to do this first step over abyss.

Warm regards and see you tomorrow! (B. Bognar, personal communication, 22nd May 2001)

We did not have big problems during the mentoring process although once V.Š. became angry with me when I insisted that she should analyse gathered data and not just attach it to the report. While we argued I found that she did not know how to statistically analyse pupils' questionnaires and how to present data on the computer. Unfortunately, she had some family problems so she did not accept my suggestions well. I promised to help her and we worked together so she learned to analyse data and how to present it using MS Excel. Our session lasted almost the whole day and during that time we solved our disagreements.

I asked teachers who undertook their own action research to describe this part of our project. They described my mentoring as stimulating and encouraging a process, which helped them to clarify their values, define problems and start their action research projects. They especially emphasized the importance of written communication and its significance for the realization of a new professional role – the role of the teacher action researcher. My regular and exhaustive answering was very important to the participants. It helped them to develop self-confidence and to maintain the realisation of the action research process.

E-mailing with the mentor during the action research was significant for me and was very stimulating for me. Since I had defined the problem and the theme of my action research I was aware how much that way of communication helped in clearing my thoughts and attitudes. Though I spoke a lot of the research with the facilitator and others participants in the project, as with those who support us in that – my pedagogue and family. Especially important to me was the correspondence via Internet. When I started the research, I kept record in my action research diary every day, and I sent these writings to the mentor. He answered me very exhaustively almost every day.

It was very significant and encouraging for me that he followed me in my ideas, he helped me to better understand what I thought and what I wrote without attempt to impose some of his solutions or ideas. He "listened" to me actively. Something else delighted me and gave the importance to my records. Branko analysed each of my sentences and commented them. He treated my records as they were literary or philosophical creation. All of that stimulated me to write regularly my diary and wait for the answer, which was often not only the answer to my letter, than it was the answer to my inner, unexpressed questions. (J.Z., personal communication, 7th May 2002)

7.6.4. Interpretation

John Butcher (2000) points out three different descriptions of mentoring. The first “view of mentoring sees it as a framework of positive support by the skilled and experienced practitioners to other practitioners who need to acquire complex skills” (p. 97). In another approach the mentor is perceived as an instructor, trainer or coach “who systematically and actively helps a student teacher reach a threshold in a set of pre-defined professional competences” (p. 98). A third view of mentoring is focused on learning rather than teaching. The mentor participates “in co-enquiry to encourage reflection on teaching as a process.” This model endeavours to move the teacher from novice to expert status (Butcher, 2000, p. 97-98). My approach to mentoring was very similar to the third approach which is mentioned by Butcher because I stimulated teachers' reflections on their teaching process and I participated in cooperative inquiry.

After the problems which occurred at the beginning of initiating teachers' action research projects, the mentoring was a completely different experience. Things shifted from the bottom line and there were not pointless agreements between participants who were not willing to participate in action research. Teachers – action researchers got down to work and began planning and working on their action research. It was a very motivational and meaningful process for all of us. It seems that we achieved much more in the realisation of our values during one month of mentoring than for several months before.

From my participation in the mentoring process I have learnt the following:

1. Mentoring seems to be the better solution for involving teachers in action research than the group meetings.
2. Mentoring satisfied teachers' needs for encouraging and supporting (Stoll and Fink, 2000).
3. I realised that for quality mentoring the number of novice action researchers should not be more than five, because all of them need enough attention which is difficult to sustain with a lot of mentees.
4. The feedback is very important for teachers who participate in mentoring, but not any and whenever. It is important that the mentor answers in a short time. In action research things occur very fast so if teachers had to wait too long for the answer maybe it would not have importance for them since new problems appear or they would lose enthusiasm for the previous problem or for the research at all. Answers should be a form of incentive. It means that teachers should be encouraged, understood and advised. The action research is emotionally a very exciting process and it is important that answers should not be official and distant because teachers could realise that the mentor is not interested in their research problems¹⁶. Critics should be balanced and explain their views. Advice which mentors offer should not be too extensive and too expert, because it could inhibit initiative of novice action researchers.

¹⁶ “Willingness to laugh and cry—that is, to include emotion as a part of the relationship—may help both mentor and protege keep alive some of their visions about what education can be. It may improve morale and relieve stress as pressure mounts during times of rapid change.” (Sullivan, 2004, p. 40)

5. Mentoring is always a risky job because in some moments criticism and advice which someone expresses could make his/her interlocutor angry, upset or hurt. It is especially possible if the teacher, due to other tasks, defers the action research or if he/she does not know how to do something. At this point it is better to delay suggestions and find out what the teacher is worried about, and then agree with him/her how to continue with cooperation.
6. E-mails manifested as a successful way of mentoring. Writing is the process that impels teachers to focus much more on thinking than speaking and written words stay as a permanent document, which may be used in a different phase of the research. Thus, written answers were much more valuable and important for teachers than spoken.
7. Participants of the action research need to discuss about their work. They usually speak with co-workers or professional advisers but also with family members.
8. Mentoring could be successful only if both sides (mentor and mentee) learn from each other. In that way the mentoring could not be reduced on the transmission of knowledge or skills as it is usually defined¹⁷ in the business field. It is rather the process where both sides are involved in the process of research with the aim of improving their practice (Fletcher, 2000; Holden, 2002, p. 20; Mullen, 1999, p. 13).
9. The mentoring process in action research could be ended with a new mentor's role - the role of critical friend. The role of critical friend provides a more egalitarian relationship than it is possible to obtain in mentoring.

The fact that only five teachers decided to do their action researches did not discourage me. I was aware that it was a great change in their earlier professional practice and it could be naive to expect that most of teachers would easily accept the new professional role. In that moment it was important that a few teachers broke the ice and conduct their action research projects, which could be used as an example for other teachers to do the same.

7.6.5. The Realisation of the second circle of teachers' action research

Teachers continued working on their action research projects during the school year 2001/2002. We assembled just occasionally to validate action research reports at the end of each research circle (Figure 5), but we continued to communicate individually, by phone or e-mail. At that time I was occupied with writing the computer program for data analyses and my MA thesis so I partly neglected my mentor's duties. However, teachers - action researchers were empowered sufficiently that they could complete their action research more independently than earlier.

¹⁷ "In the business field, the term is frequently used to describe a method for helping people learn new skills and probably derives from the concept of apprenticeship where experienced masters passed on their knowledge and skills to the apprentices." (Veenman et al., 1998, p. 414)



Figure 5. Validation of second circle of V.S's action research

V.S.'s research was connected with improving children's creativity through socio-dramatic plays. Her first circle of the action research was not an action research in the rigorous sense of the word, because she did not fully acquire an action research approach. However, it was important that she started researching in a way that resulted in a clearer and more systematic methodology in the second circle. She intended to deal with same topic. In her unpublished report she emphasised the following research problem:

My dissatisfaction with earlier practice in realization of issues connected with the dramatization of a literary text, a fairy tale or a fable has several causes: strictly following the determined steps in the realisation of teaching units or lesson plans, insufficient knowledge on theatrical laws. It emphasized incongruence between the present situation and something what I want to obtain. That impels me to try to change and improve my former practice. I learnt the basics of theatre art in three-day seminar, Pirandello's anti-drama "Six Characters in Search of an Author" and in cooperation with leaders of theatrical groups. I consider as very important to emphasize that I obtained this research with children and not on them. Namely, children were actively involved in all phases of the research: planning, gathering data and reflection. (V.S., personal communication, February 2002)

She wrote about our cooperation in the realisation of her action research the following:

Considering the cooperation with my mentor I realised that it was necessary, incentive and useful. Through that cooperation I enriched my own knowledge and I am more ready to tend and impel cooperative relationship between students and co-workers. At the beginning of the work (project) I expected that I will deal with determined, given theme, under the mentor's control, that he will "grade and assess" afterwards. Actually, he led us with plenty of freedom, and it was my responsibility to choose a theme, a problem, research questions, schedule and the way of research. During the work we communicated personally, by phone or by e-mail.

I welcomed articles and books which he sent to me in a right moment (when I needed them). I appreciated his help which he provided me in using computer, which is still continued. The mentor did not impel addictive or too much dependent relationship between a teacher and a

mentor. But, he was always there for us when something stuck (e.g. working on qualitative analyses). I was disturbed and inhibited by his constant recording every meeting, conversation, interview by Dictaphone, camcorder or camera. However, I liked his friendly, well-intentioned, critical relation that aroused my self-confidence, trust and activity (V.Š., personal communication, 13 May 2003)

J.Z. decided to deal with the cooperative learning. She sent me her action research report which consisted of one page of the text in which she described her experience of dealing with the topic of her research. The text was without theoretical introduction, clearly defined problem and a plan of research. Her conclusions were not corroborated with data. It was an interesting reflective text about utilizing cooperative learning, but not an action research report. I wrote to her the following answer:

Text which you sent to me is your reflection about what you did, but it is not the action research report. In your text there are plenty of interesting ideas and it is a good starting point for the action research. I do not know, did you gather any data. If you did not, or if you did not have enough data, then it could be the beginning of action research, but this is not a research. Research is based on data, not on ideas. Ideas are a starting point, an action is their implementation, the data are used as a feedback which through analyses could bring us to the conclusions and new problems that could impel us to continue with the new circle of research. You don't have to finish your action research until next Wednesday. Therefore, let it be the beginning of your real action research which is grounded on data. (B. Bognar, personal communication, 17 Jan 2002)



Figure 6. Validation of J.Z.'s action research report

J.Z. accepted my critical comments and she got down to work until she had finished her real action research. She wrote her action research report and sent it to other participants in advance. We organized the validation of J.Z.'s action research report at her school and in her classroom (Figure 6). The meeting was attended by several project participants and a few teachers from her school, her headmaster and pedagogue. The meeting was facilitated throughout by J.Z. I was just the participant. Almost all participants

were involved in conversation. J.Z. and Z.S. argued about the type of cooperative tasks and their suitability for developing the cooperative relationships. They presented theoretical and practical knowledge about the topic of the conversation.

J.Z. said that she leaned on me too much as mentor at the beginning, but in this phase of her action research she did almost everything alone. She emphasized the conclusion that the action research was her concern, not mine. J.Z. said that it was her emancipation. A.B. congratulated her on success. J.Z.'s pedagogue L.B. announced that the action research in their school will be continued. She said that they will become one small learning community.

The project finished, but our action researches are not finished for us. We continue to improve our practice and our action research methodology. We also try to popularise action researches in Croatia and abroad. The teachers who completed their action research projects had the opportunity to present them at official seminars which were organised by the Teacher Training Agency of the Republic of Croatia.

7.6.6. Interpretation

During this phase of the project a few teachers dissociated from the rest of the participants who were just spectators of their dealing with action research. None of the rest of the participants expressed the wish to conduct her own action research. In comparison with the first part of the project in which more teachers were involved this phase could seem like a fail. However, those teachers who dealt with action research were much more active than in the first part of the project and they improved their practice. Although the first part of the project attracted more teachers, it had no discernible effect on their practice. Therefore, looking at the second phase, action research is without any doubt an effective way of improving teachers' practices. The question is how to enable more teachers to deal with it.

A first answer could be introducing action research in teachers' preservice education. Namely, dealing with action research presumes various competences and knowledge which could be gained only through systematic education. During this project I started to teach the subject Research in Education¹⁸ at the Teachers' faculty in Slavonski Brod. Students who are preparing to be teachers have the opportunity to learn how to conduct action research in teaching practice. A second solution could be the professional development of teachers. Teachers who would like to undertake this role could form communities of practice and along with facilitators (e.g. pedagogues or experienced teachers) initiate their action research projects. They also could make connections with other learning communities with the aim of exchanging experiences and learning from each other. This was the next step which we implemented in subsequent projects.

Since in this and following projects mentors' support was particularly important, it is recommended that experienced teachers and pedagogues take this responsibility and help their colleagues in undertaking the role of action researcher. In Croatia this would not require considerable financial resources, although it would presume significant changes in

¹⁸ The name of this subject was changed several years ago in Methodology of pedagogical research.

teachers' professional development. Along with that profile the professional expectations of teachers and pedagogues should be redefined. In this and some other projects it became apparent that the majority of teachers are not ready to become action researchers without systematic support in their school contexts.

Although I presented our action research projects at many professional seminars all around Croatia, the situation is still not ripe for the wider application of this approach in our schools. The main problem is that representatives of our academic community still neglect this approach, and are much more supportive of positivistic research. Recently, one student analysed three Croatian educational journals and found out that more than 96% of published research accounts belong to a positivistic paradigm (Kulić, 2012).

Another problem is the lack of clear vision and professionalism in governing structures which are responsible for education. Such a situation "has resulted in a lack of change, innovation, and accountability":

Although education "strategies" have been drafted in Croatia, they have not been implemented, and major reforms have not yet been undertaken at any level. Croatia's situation in this regard is similar to Serbia's and Bulgaria's. By contrast, Slovenia, Czech Republic, and Hungary have implemented wide-ranging reforms based on agreed strategies. Decentralization of the education system has been a priority in several transition countries, although the extent and success of decentralization have varied. Croatia has carried out very little decentralization, and this – along with conflicting authorities, a lack of system-wide focus, and poor management – has resulted in a lack of change, innovation, and accountability. In comparison with other transition countries, Croatia has rigid, hierarchical and opaque governance and management of its education system. (Lowther, 2004, p. 17)

A previous critical analysis was published shortly after finishing this project, but the situation has remained unchanged and in some aspects it is even worse due to the financial crisis. Although there are not too many reasons for optimism, I hope that efforts of teachers and students who have conducted their action researcher projects will yield fruit in a wider educational and social context, eventually. In the meantime, I have to be satisfied with results which are small in scope, but constitute significant changes in the practice of individual teachers.

In dealing with action research of individual teachers I can accept Dick's opinion that action research often starts with a fuzzy research question and methodology. "But here is the important point... Provided that the fuzzy answer allows you to refine both question and methods, you eventually converge towards precision. It is the spiral process which allows both responsiveness and rigour at the same time." (Dick, 1993) Since action research requires a greater level of professional competence it is not realistic to expect that even those teachers who decide to conduct action research will be able to obtain this overnight. They need time and support to learn how to properly carry out action research in all its phases. My idea to start with a reflective practicum and then to continue with action research was appropriate, but I did not allocate enough time for the next phase. Along with that, my initial intention to lead a group of more than 15 novice action researchers was completely unrealistic.

I consider that the biggest achievement of this project phase was taking responsibility for maintaining and quality of action research by several teachers. Along with that I have noticed the following improvements:

1. Teachers – action researcher's clearly defined problems,
2. They used literature and knowledge which they acquired at professional meetings,
3. They used different methods to gather data,
4. They wrote reports,
5. They prepared and led their validation meetings.
6. Teachers – action researchers presented their action research projects at professional seminars.

However, written action research reports were not of sufficient quality to be published in professional publications, but teachers produced well designed multimedia presentations which were presented at professional seminars. This form of reporting does not fit traditional ways of thinking but it is in accordance with non-linear ways of thinking and reporting which could contribute to the popularisation of this approach:

Traditional forms of enquiry tend to use traditional ways of thinking. The aim is to show how processes of enquiry lead to certain conclusions, and how linear forms of thinking and reporting can show the processes of establishing causal relationships: 'If I do this, that will happen'. New forms of enquiry tend to use non-traditional ways of thinking. The aim is to show how dynamic processes of enquiry can lead to improved practices; perhaps the best way is to use creative ways of thinking and non-linear forms of reporting that show the processes of 'I wonder what would happen if...'. Non-linear ways of thinking and reporting can be represented using a variety of forms and media, including writing, story-telling, dialogue, visual narratives, and other forms of physical representation such as dance or performance, and a combination of all these forms. (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 223-224)

I realised that the process of change is not linear because we sometimes have to put our values on hold. In that time we might examine values, or wait until the situation becomes ripe for changes. In our case, I could not change my dominant role, until some of my participants became ready to take responsibility for realisation of the project. When J.Z. became ready to take the role of the facilitator she did it almost subtly.

The action research never ends. Its main value is not in answers but in questions and problems which arise from the process of change. The action research does not change the whole world but just individuals. That is its advantage in relation to the approaches which attempt to change the whole world and often fail to change individuals. For those participants who did not conduct action research nothing substantial changed. They continued to attend our professional meetings which at this time were planned and realised by teachers – action researchers, not me. Action research represents a form of emancipatory practice which could have an impact on obtaining significant changes of those people who actively participate in it. Merely watching what other people do could be a good incentive, but this won't cause any improvement until one is starting to deal with it personally. A similar situation is obvious regarding reading books and attending professional seminars. They all could be educational for someone if he/she is in the process of dealing with changes, in our case with action research. This is in accordance with Marentič-Požarnik's (1993, p. 354) claim that no-one can learn action research from a book since it is not merely the scientific approach, rather it is the creative answer to the challenges of improving our educational practice. If someone would like to learn what action research is, he/she must try to accomplish it.

8. New projects and visions

This action research project opened numerous new problems which may be researched. I would extract just several which have been our subsequent projects.

1. After this project we started with several projects, the main aim of which was helping teachers to improve their practice by using action research. Those efforts resulted in significant changes in teaching of many teachers who participated in those projects. Some of those teachers published their accounts in professional publications (see [Kljaić, 2006](#); [Bilić-Meštrić, 2011](#); [Mandarić, 2011](#); [Pavić, 2011](#)) and presented them at numerous professional seminars and several conferences (see <http://ejolts.net/conference>). In that way we popularized the action research approach in our country and abroad.
2. We established cooperation with the representatives of living theory action research approach. The result of this cooperation was establishing the Educational Journal of Living Theories (<http://ejolts.net>). Several teachers from our teams published their papers in this journal ([Bognar & Zovko, 2008](#); [Ibraković & Bognar, 2009](#); [Gavran, 2009](#); [Vidović & Kuharić Bučević, 2013](#)).
3. For more than ten years I have taught students of Teachers' faculty in Slavonski Brod to deal with action research. Many of them wrote their graduation thesis in the form of action research accounts. Their reports are used in other university subjects which I've taught at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences where I have been employed.
4. Instead of using emails for communication and sharing the learning materials we use the advanced Course Management System - Moodle. "It is a free web application that educators can use to create effective online learning sites" (<http://moodle.org>). This technological advancement allowed us better communication and learning (see <http://pedagogija.net>, <http://kreativnost.pedagogija.net>)

Regarding the possibilities of teachers' professional development through action research the situation in Croatia still is not rosy. Our example is not the rule. The action researchers in Croatia do not receive any financial support from our government; and in spite of numerous seminars, teachers cannot count on systematic support to undertake this pretty demanding professional role. We can just use school resources if a head teacher is kindly disposed to our projects and we can provide help to each other.

However, our old-fashioned educational system should be radically improved. In regard to this tendency I see an opportunity that our individual efforts to become good examples and provide encouragement to other educators in changing their practices. In the meantime we just could change ourselves and hope that the others will recognize the worth of our efforts and do the same or something better.

Action research approaches in teachers' professional development cannot be equated with an occasional professional gathering. This is rather a way of life which provides happiness of creation to teachers but also demands from them that they take the responsibility for the results which they intend to gain. Only emancipated, competent, creative and self-critical teachers may help to develop schools of higher quality and action research is very important and effective way for gaining this valuable aim.

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