

2nd International Conference on Lifelong Education and Leadership for All

Giving Voice to the Outcomes of Our Research

Linda PAVITOLA¹, Dina BETHERE², Lasma LATSONE³

¹Liepaja University, Faculty of Education and Social Work
Email:-linda.pavitola@liepu.lv,

²Liepaja University, Faculty of Education and Social Work
Email:-dina.bethere@liepu.lv

³Liepaja University, Faculty of Education and Social Work
Email:-lasma.latsone@liepu.lv

Abstract

The authors of the article share the belief that research is an important, valuable and virtuous activity, needed both for researchers themselves and for larger communities, since the outcomes of the research can contribute to extending the theoretical and practical knowledge for improving the process of teaching and learning and the development of teacher education programmes, as well as perfect researchers' own professional competence. In this article, the authors will communicate their understanding about the research process itself and its outcomes, in order to evaluate their significance at both personal and professional levels, as well as gather the reflections and perspectives of early career researchers - Master's level students - about how to reach the outcomes of research and implement them into educational practice. The goal of the study is to explore the aspects of new researchers' professional competence and its significance in the existing practice of educational research, thus promoting a research culture that values good research principles and discovers new perspectives for the implementation of research outcomes. The following research question has been put forward: what kind of support is needed to the new researchers to face the challenges of research processes and implement the outcomes in educational practice. A qualitative case research methodology, based on a social constructivist paradigm and hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology approach, is used to address the topic. The research sample represents 45 new researchers from Liepaja University - selected by using purposeful random sampling strategy, and a survey data collection technique with open-ended questions is used. An interpretive and critical approach to the data analysis has been applied and good practice examples derived from the analysis of the survey, thus encouraging researchers to reflect on the features of their professional competence and existing experience and consider how it can be relevant to others. The findings have helped the authors of this study to identify the possible profile of new researchers pointing to the main challenges that teacher educators face, and enhance appropriate support to new researchers, in order to help them to be successful on a personal and institutional level, as well as to move towards the national and global level. These issues reflect on existing situation in the field of education and present the authors' vision of potential meaningful strategies in this context.

Keywords: Educational research, New researchers' profile, Research competence, Research outcomes

1. Introduction

The theoretical and practical context of the study and beliefs are based on the educational theories and reveal current trends in educational research that highlight the challenges in research processes and reflect the contradiction between the subjective and social significance of the research. The topicality of these issues has resulted from the findings of the previous study undertaken by the authors (Pavitola, Latsone and Bethere, 2016), revealing the need for a change in attitude and the necessity to introduce and support a systemic strategy for research activities. The authors hold a strong commitment to the idea of ensuring the implementation of full research life cycle in educational research practice, which contains not only conceptualising, documenting, describing, analysing, and publishing data, but also translating and engaging or, in other words, re-using the data by involving the potential users of the research outcomes in its actual applications (Corti et al., 2014; RIN/NESTA, 2010).

The theoretical background of our research reveals the current trends in education characterized by postmodernism and constructivism with a democratic and humanistic approach to pedagogy, where increasing importance is assigned to the employment of creative approaches, awareness of diversity aspects and positive pedagogical relationships between experienced and new researchers that develop in these contexts. In order to understand the essence of the research process, its outcomes and impact, the entire ecological system in which it occurs has to be considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The ecological systems theory emphasizes the interactions with others and the environment as a conceptual system and a key to development and ranges from the microsystem - personal level, to the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem that represent institutional, national and global levels.

Researchers should act in all of these levels according to their goals, professional performance, and professional competence. For example, new researchers might tend to implement their original ideas in practice at a personal, institutional and national level, whereas experienced researchers have to expand the implementation to a global level, at the same time, being active members of the scientific community also at a national level. Transforming the beliefs of the ecological systems theory into research contexts, it has to be emphasized that the process of interactivity between different levels occurs during a long period of time and contains immediate environment, patterns of culture and bodies of knowledge.

Since there exists a problematic of understanding the subjective and social significance of research outcomes, especially among new researchers, it is important to reflect on the aspects of the personal level to raise awareness of interactive processes that occur inside the microsystem and ensure interactivity with other elements of the whole system. New researchers develop their professional competence by exploring their nearest environment and systems they encounter that cause changes in the structure of the mesosystem, thus ensuring the subjective significance of their research. In order to progress and have the impact at national and global levels, researchers have to put forward socially significant research objectives that would help to create interactive links between the exosystem and macrosystem, as well as to influence cultural, political and economic contexts. The authors of the article share the belief that acquired professional research competence is of utmost significance in the whole process of research permeating microsystemic dimensions and developing interactional and transactional relations within mesosystemic and macrosystemic dimensions (Bethere and Mackevica, 2011), thus ensuring opportunities for completing research and giving voice to the outcomes.

Thus, it is important to consider the way in which the notion of competence is defined and its meaning is understood. The authors of the article agree with Biesta (2012; 2015), who communicates competence as a concept that represents an integrative approach to professional action and encompasses knowledge, skills, understandings, values, and purposes, rather than the application of knowledge or the enactment of skills. This includes emotional, theoretical and methodological knowledge, particularly emphasizing emotional aspects that are closely connected with relationship building and interactive behaviours (Biesta, 2012, 2015; Pugh and Tyson, 2014). Competence development strategies, in turn, result in professional dispositions, the concept similar to professional beliefs or values systems, but more complex, as it is manifested in one's behaviour, thus becoming an indicator of the way of being and acting of a person (Jung and Rhodes, 2008; Welch et al., 2014). It is important to be aware of professional dispositions and develop the ability to apply them into research practice by employing a virtue-based approach, aimed at the formation of research virtuous professionals with "embodied educational wisdom and embodied ability to make wise educational judgements about what is to be done" (Biesta 2015, p.10).

Consequently, these aspects might have the potential to promote the professional agency of researchers and place their knowledge, skills and ways of doing within the wider context of the question, as well as create a research network and share the outcomes with the target audience that would appreciate them the most. In this respect sometimes an unfortunate tendency is evident when the audience has difficulties to understand the complicated models and figures and their meaning. This can lead to the situation that outcomes are not shared but rather exist in a virtual environment or libraries. Therefore, considering the issues of publishing research results and their impact, there is a need to make them understandable and available for the target audiences. However, when interpreting research outcomes and making them comprehensible to others, the replacing traditional concepts with new ones must be avoided, as it can result in losing the essence of the research that can lead to the endless regress (Quine, 1980).

These ideas have a special relevance for the new researchers, who were selected as a sample of respondents in the study in order to find out what kind of support they need to develop their research competence – not only in terms of organizing, documenting, preserving and sharing the research data but also of promoting scientific discourse, widening opportunities for innovations and making their voices heard.

Consequently, the goal of the study is to explore the aspects of new researchers' professional competence and its significance in the existing practice of educational research, thus promoting a research culture that values good research principles and discovers new perspectives when implementing the research outcomes. The following research question has been put forward: what kind of support is needed to new researchers to face the challenges of research processes and develop awareness of the subjective and social significance of their research.

2.Method

A qualitative case study research design is used to address the topic, based on a social constructivist paradigm and hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology approach. The research sample represents 45 new researchers, master level students from teacher education study programmes at Liepaja University, who were selected by using purposeful random sampling strategy. A data collection technique of the survey with open-ended questions was used to avoid placing any limits on the response, in order to learn the context and enrich the data. An interpretive and critical approach to the qualitative content analysis has been employed, thus deriving the good practice examples from the survey analysis and encouraging the new researchers to reflect on the features of their professional competence and existing experience and consider how it can be relevant to others. The research design contains three successive phases: 1) elaboration of the survey and gathering data from respondents, 2) analysis of the data using qualitative content analysis, and 3) description of a new researcher's profile in terms of personal qualities necessary for facing the challenges of research processes, thus discovering the areas where support is needed and raising awareness of the social significance of research findings in educational practice.

During the survey elaboration process, the authors of this article adapted and employed the model of self-reflection on researcher's personal qualities (adapted from Dieterich and Dieterich, 2007), since professional self-reflection is one of the main aspects of competence development. The respondents were encouraged to reflect on the features of their professional competence, thus revealing the aspects, where an experienced support is needed. The following open-ended questions, which require non-restricted answers and give an added value to the data analysis and interpretation, were used to complement the data:

- What motivates you to conduct research?
- What are the outcomes of your research?
- How do you evaluate the opportunities to implement your research results into practice?
- How the involvement in research processes develops your research competence?

The qualitative content analysis was used to interpret meaning of the responses, and the following coding categories from the data were derived by the authors:

- 1) personal qualities of the new researchers, relying on self-evaluation of their research competence and motivation for getting involved in research processes,
- 2) aspects of the research process itself, emphasizing research outcomes and opportunities of their implementation.

Regarding the goal of the study, the aspects of new researchers' professional competence were explored and the data were analysed and interpreted based according to the Model for promoting openness and criticality in educational research (Pavitola, Latsone and Bethere, 2016, p.107), which suggests possible actions of how to ensure the meaningful research process providing the outcomes oriented towards social and economic impact: a) awareness of the goal and the audience, b) collaboration and networking locally, nationally and internationally, c) listening in and sharing experiences, d) analysis of theoretical literature that challenges different points of view, e) dissemination and feedback, and f) personal self – reflection. The model coincides with researcher's

qualities needed for raising research competence and awareness of the social significance of research outcomes, thus resulting in professional dispositions` development.

All the data, including the mentioned coding categories, were interpreted by using a critical approach to the data analysis, in accordance with two criterions: a) subjective and b) social significance of the research. Possible interrelations among personal, institutional, national, and global levels of the ecosystem were discerned and good practice examples were derived from the analysis of the survey that gave proof to the opportunities of implementation of research outcomes into educational practice.

The study relies on the professional experience of the authors accumulated at Liepaja University. Although there could be a concern of external validity and generalizability, since the authors have selected a single case study typical for Liepaja University master level students, the implementation of the research design has been influenced by regionalization and specialization of higher education institutions in the context of the education system of Latvia, which, in turn, allows to speculate about similar tendencies that occur at national level. Moreover, the validity of the outcomes of the study is confirmed by suggested possible ways for support needed for the new researchers and the reflection on the possible framework for further research in wider contexts.

3.Findings and Results

3.1.Personal qualities of new researchers

Regarding the first coding category, the description of a new researcher profile was made by selecting the self-evaluated personal qualities that were represented in more than 60% of cases and consequently considered as typical for the research sample. These survey data were grouped in accordance with the aspects characterizing the socially recognised research process, identified in the model developed by Pavitola, Latsone and Bethere (2016, p.107), in order to find out relations between the new researchers` profile and the aspects of the meaningful research process (see Table 1).

Table 1. Relations between the meaningful research process and the new researchers` profile

Aspects of the meaningful research process	New researchers` profile
Awareness of the goal and the audience	Use pragmatic approach to analyse events and human characteristics
Analysis of theoretical literature that challenges different points of view	Sensitive approach towards problems
Listening in and sharing experiences	Orientation towards social contacts
Collaboration and networking locally, nationally and internationally	Think over before making decisions
	Highly value stability in relationships and material environment
Dissemination and feedback	Flexible approach and self-reliance to conducting activities
	Adapt to social environment and its demands
Personal self – reflection	Trust in other people
	Anxiety in relation to own strength and competence
	Conform to the influence of other people and environment

The Table 1 illustrates that the respondents prefer stability, ability to adapt to the social environment and its demands, as well as conformity to other ideas and environment. The new researchers` profile does not include such vital qualities as openness to new ideas, sense of responsibility, and emotional resistance to external influences, as these answers were represented in less than 40 % of cases. Possibly it is caused by doubts about one`s own competence that hinder the ability to reflect on critically and perceive practices in new and meaningful ways.

Regarding the question about the motivation to join the research process and conduct a research, the responses point to the higher significance of subjective factors rather than social ones. Typical answers were such as *“interest in the topic”*, *“desire to test assumptions”*, *“participation aspects”*, *“obtain Master’s degree”*, and *“availability of resources and encouraging research environment”*, whereas aspects of social significance were present in the responses like *“finding solution for the problems”* and *“other people will benefit from the outcomes”*. Only in individual cases, the respondents mentioned that their motivation is driven by the desire to be part of educational processes to benefit one’s own children or to bring change in schools, as well as by the ambition for personal and professional growth.

Subjective factors are dominant also in the self-evaluation of the dynamics of the respondents’ research competence development during the research practice. Resulting from the data, the majority of new researchers point to the enrichment of knowledge and competence, and present their opinion about the research skills they improved, for example, *“I reached understanding about how to go about implementing my research ideas”*, *“I learnt to combine different research methods”*, *“I improved communication skills, analytical abilities”*, and *“I learned to ask questions and talk to people”*.

Some responses reveal different opinions and perspectives, which reveal a trend towards the awareness of the impact of research outcomes. These answers reflect on creating relationships and sharing research outcomes not only at the personal level, but also in wider contexts that point to the social significance. The data illustrate that the respondents have experienced a research as a process of learning by doing and they have gained a deeper understanding of how to use the obtained knowledge in praxis, as well as they feel more confident and open to new ideas and experiments. Among this type of experiences, there were mentioned such answers as *“I was able to get involved in class work and help the students”*, *“It influenced my stereotypes allowing to look at research questions more qualitatively”*, and *“It gave me opportunity to look critically at my work and change my attitude”*. However, one of the new researchers was very convinced of her/his research skills – *“I already have researcher’s competence”*.

3.2.Aspects of the research process itself

Regarding the findings of the second coding category, the emphasis is put on the outcomes of research and opportunities for their implementation, thus revealing whether the outcomes are valued as subjectively and/or socially relevant and turning a particular attention towards the presence of social significance. Reflecting on one’s own research experience, the respondents rarely mentioned or analysed the findings of their own research – the answers were very general and in the majority of cases they gave a description of what was the study about, but no outcomes were mentioned. The most typical general phrases used by the respondents to answer the question of what are the outcomes of own research, are the following - *„the hypothesis was approved”*, *„experimental group had more creative works”*, *„results were positive”*, *„there is a need to pay greater attention to course books”* and others. Relatively rarely did the respondents describe real results – only 7 out of 45. These responses confirmed the significance of the outcomes in a wider social context – among them were recommendations for methodology improvement, elaborated experimental programme, and a model of promoting participation. However, there also was present an individual opinion that there is a need to conform to rules and conditions, in order to get a positive evaluation of a master paper.

Regarding to the last question of the survey, which asks to evaluate the opportunities of implementation of the research results into educational practice, the answers of the respondents show an optimistic tendency – almost all responses were positive, for example, *“Everything is possible, especially if people are oriented towards positive change”*, *“I believe that the results should be implemented gradually: step by step”*, or *“I would really like to implement my research results in praxis”*. However, some respondents were cautious and critical, considering that it is possible but complicated and it is difficult to make the prognosis, as *“it is not a job for one person”*. Some of the answers pointed to external factors that could hinder the implementation of the outcomes, for example, *“It depends on the institution – its leadership, readiness and attitude”*, as well as on internal factors connected with self-evaluation of research competence – *“I will implement it when I become more skillful”*.

Resulting from the findings of the study, the research outcomes of the respondents are related to the microsystem of higher education. However, taking into consideration the unity of national macrosystem's demands regarding the research process itself and its coordination, common tendencies are present in the process of giving the voice to the research outcomes in the field of educational research that illustrate a possible profile of new researchers and present the authors' vision of potential and meaningful support strategies for individual research goals that arise in this context.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In order to explore possible perspectives regarding to the research problematic by seeking for answers of what kind of support is needed to the new researchers to face the challenges of research processes and develop awareness of the subjective and social significance of their research, the authors of the study analysed and interpreted the findings according to the criteria, which reveal the aspects of research competence of the respondents, their attitude and dynamics of making progress towards the comprehension of social significance of research outcomes, that, in turn, could give input into raised awareness of professional dispositions.

The empirical study confirms the theoretical beliefs that in a modern society the categories of the personal and social significance of the research are practically inseparable. Developmental trends leading towards the social environment of pluralism, cause spontaneous changes of the traditional environment, its subcultures and a type of the lifestyle. As a result, a greater role in social processes is assigned to the individual perception and evaluation (Flick, 2002).

It is evident the research process is affected by global processes and political decisions, consequently initiating significant scientific projects. However, in the context of social changes, the research topicality to a great extent is determined by social needs of a personality and its creative activity. At the same time, at least in the context of Latvia higher education system, there is a requirement for research novelty at least at the theoretical level. Regarding the above-mentioned social changes, such a task might be quite complex or impossible for the new researcher. Therefore, a need arises for the informed support, in order to study the facts, events, ideas and develop original explanations, and, at the same time, covering a wider scope of an individual's life than just one microsystem.

Expanding on earlier work by the authors, which communicates good research principles and contains suggestions for their implementation into the process of educational research, as well as relying on the Model for promoting openness and criticality in educational research described in the Method section (Pavitola, Latsone and Bethere, 2016), this study was intended to highlight the aspects of new researchers' personal qualities that support professional competence and enhance meaningful research process. Consequently, a possible profile of new researchers was identified, pointing to the main challenges and appropriate support strategies that could promote awareness of research process and its outcomes on a personal and institutional level, as well as enhance the progress of research towards the national and global levels. These issues are closely connected with the aspects of research culture inside the research community and employment of a virtue-based approach, thus allowing the new researchers to develop their research competence and raise awareness of professional dispositions (Biesta, 2012, 2015; Welch et al., 2014).

The analysis of the findings underpinning the developed new researchers' profile, points to the tendency towards the preference of the traditional research process, where the respondents position themselves as observers rather than active participants. Although the study confirms that they highly value social contacts, other aspects of the self-evaluation reflect on a common and usual practice of choosing to explore some problem without being aware of its possible implementation into existing educational practices. Therefore, it is necessary to orient possible support towards promoting such personal qualities as independence, self-reliance, willingness and ability to apply nonconventional approaches and abstract ideas. In order to raise awareness of the socially significant research outcomes, there is a need for reflection throughout the whole research process, in order to be able to engage with possible challenges and topical problematic.

The authors hold a strong commitment to the idea that it is essential to be aware of the research process and its phases, starting with putting forward socially significant goals and elaborating possible research design, and moving up to the publishing, sharing and re-using the finding, thus giving voice to the outcomes of the research. This also raises a question about the position of a researcher in the whole process, being aware of the both subjective and social significance of the outcomes. Regarding future prospects, the analysis of the findings implied that, although new researchers highly value social contacts, trust in other people, self-reliance, and flexible approaches, they still lack a comprehension about how to define the outcomes of their research and willingness to implement and test the results into educational practice. It has to be emphasized that merely a publication of the research findings does not mean that the research is accomplished and its results available for the wider audience.

Possibly the dynamics of the new researchers` competence development is rooted in the aspects of their motivation to undertake a research, as well as in their ability or inability to define the goals and research questions for their studies. If the motivation is external and connected with the desire to obtain a master`s degree or the selection of the topic is based on such criterions as available materials or outer demands, it does not enable the development of original ideas and their implementation into educational practice. Consequently, it is important to identify and avoid such type of situations, as they raise concerns about the issues due to the research competence development and presence of professional dispositions.

Resulting from the findings of the theoretical and empirical study, the authors can draw the following conclusions in relation to the defined research goal and the research question:

1. In the academic context of the explored single case, there is a contradiction between the social and subjective significance of the research, as well as an insufficient orientation towards the research goals and the audience, who would benefit from these results.
2. Self-evaluation of the new researcher` personal qualities proves the scientific potential of new researchers by demonstrating the willingness to implement the research outcomes in practice, however, reflecting on the research motivation aspects, the predominance of subjective factors over social ones is present.
3. The developed new researchers` profile reveals the preference of being involved in a traditional research process, where the respondents can position themselves as observers rather than active participants. Although the study confirms the significance of social contacts, there is a need to strengthen such new researchers` qualities as flexibility, openness to new ideas, use of unconventional approaches and trust in one`s own competence.
4. There is a lack of a meaningful and informed support oriented towards the development of the respondents` research competence, which would allow to reflect, critically evaluate, carry out comparative analysis, and raise the awareness of the research outcomes, thus enabling the new researchers to progress from personal level towards national and global ones, by moving from the subjective to social significance and creating meaningful relationships within the ecosystem to foster awareness of professional dispositions.

5.Recommendations

Due to the limits of the case study, it is not possible to generalize the findings as typical for all scientific community in Latvia, however, the findings suggest the framework for improving research practice and articulate possible recommendations as well as highlight strategies for informed and experienced support needed for the new researchers:

1. The study process of master level students has to support and improve the strengths oriented to collaboration and networking, and research skills development with a particular emphasis on raising the aspects of self-reliance.
2. There is a need to ensure a positive context and resources regarding the process of conducting and accomplishing the research to be able to develop interactive relationships among all levels of the ecosystem.

3. The support for individual research goals based on society interests and demands is of great importance in raising motivation to get involved in research processes and raising awareness of research outcomes and their significance for educational practice. This implies to the necessity to provide tools for developing skills to reflect on the new researchers` existing experience.
4. The use of action research is considered as the starting point for improving the practice, which changes one`s thinking and attitude through self-reflection (McNiff, 2010). This could provide immediate results in terms of research competence development and balance the influence of internal and external factors in the research process.

6. References

- Bethere, D., Mackevica, L. (2011). Ensuring interactional relations of the child`s life microsystems in the structure of multidimensional model of educational transition period. *International scientific conference: Society, integration, education* (pp. 363-372). Rezekne: Web of Knowledge, WOS: 000316708500034.
- Biesta, G. (2015). How does a competent teacher become a good teacher? On judgement, wisdom and virtuosity in teaching and teacher education. In R. Heilbronn, & L. Foreman-Peck, *Philosophical Perspectives on the Future of Teacher Education*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Biesta, G. J. (2012). Giving Teaching Back to Education: Responding to the Disappearance of the Teacher. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 6(2), 35-49.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In *International Encyclopedia of Education* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 1643-1647). Oxford: Elsevier Sciences.
- Corti, L., Van den Eynden, V., Bishop, L., and Woollard, M. (2014, February 25). Managing and Sharing Research Data. A Guide to Good Practice. *Sage*, 16-23.
- Dieterich, J. and Dieterich, M. (2007). Die Persönlichkeit von Lehrern und mögliche Auswirkungen auf die Unterrichtsgestaltung. *Bildungsforschung*, 4(2). Retrieved from <http://bildungsforschung.org/index.php/bildungsforschung/article/view/72/75>
- Flick, U. (2002). *Qualitative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung*. Reinbek: Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie.
- Jung, E., and Rhodes, M. D. (2008). Revisiting disposition assessment in teacher education: broadening the focus. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(6), 647-660.
- McNiff, J. (2010). *Action Research for Professional development*. Dorset: September Books.
- Pavkola, L., Latsone, L. and Bethere, D. (2016). Perspectives on criticality and openness in educational research in the context of Latvia. In *Values and Virtues in Higher Education Research: Critical perspectives* (pp. 94 –109). Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Pugh, E. and Tyson, E. (2014, July 22-23). The emotional knowledge of teaching: trainee teachers` response to an observation and feedback tool". *4th International Conference on Value and virtue in Practice-Based Research "Openness and Criticality: Evaluating and Publishing Our Research"*. York, UK: York St John University.
- Quine, W. V. (1980). *Wort im Gegenstand*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- RIN/NESTA. (2010). *Open for All? Case Studies of Openness in Research*. London: The Research Information Network/The National Endowment for Science.
- Welch, A. G., Napoleon, L., Hill, B. and Roumell, E. (2014, September). Virtual Teaching Dispositions Scale (VTDS): A Multi-dimensional Instrument to Assess Teaching Dispositions in Virtual Classrooms. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(3), 446-467.