

ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

**PROFESSIONAL
ACTIVATION OF PEOPLE
WITH PROFOUND
INTELLECTUAL
DISABILITIES IN A
THEORETICAL AND
PRACTICAL APPROACH.**

PROJECT AION

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The AION project benefits from funding worth EUR 195,828 from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the EEA Funds.

The aim of the project is to develop a comprehensive, systemic model of preparing people with more severe intellectual disabilities for professional activity. Preparing vocational workshops along with educational programs and methodology. Developing a coherent and systemic strategy to support the employment of people with intellectual disability on the labor market in cooperation with the Polish Labor Office in Sosnowiec. Developing a professional development path and an inclusion strategy in open and/or protected labor market, taking into account the educational, legal and organizational housing for schools, people with disabilities, public institutions and entrepreneurs that may potentially employ people with disabilities.

Contents

ENTRY.....	4
EDUCATING A STUDENT WITH MORE PROFOUND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS.....	6
DISTRICT LABOR OFFICE IN SOSNOWIEC – TASKS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS.....	13
SPECIAL SCHOOL COMPLEX No. 4 IN SOSNOWIEC – IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ACTION. ORGANIZATION OF SUPPORTED PRACTICES.....	16
CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RESEARCH - RESEARCH GOALS AND QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PROJECT.....	17
1. PROBLEMATIZATION/DIAGNOSIS.....	19
2. CONCEPT/HYPOTHESIS/PROGRAM.....	20
3. IMPLEMENTATIONS.....	21
4. REFLECTION/EVALUATION.....	22
AN ENDING THAT STILL GOES ON.....	24

Entry

Contemporary changes in the understanding of the essence of intellectual disability, and therefore of people with deeper intellectual disabilities themselves, indicate the need to involve the community in order to prepare them to participate in social life. One of the elements of their preparation is professional activation. Activation that will help them learn what work is, what its values are and what opportunities it offers for their personal development. This is an important element of independence, which in itself has a revalidating character. Moreover, the professional activity of people with intellectual disabilities is also important for shaping social attitudes towards people with disabilities. It can be assumed that there is feedback not only in the personal dimension of people with disabilities themselves (I work → I improve my level of functioning → I live better → I work better), but also in social attitudes (A person with disability works → I get to know them → Verifies stereotypes/reduces anxiety → I perceive people with ID as valuable members of the community → I am more open to employment → I create jobs → more people with ID find jobs) Therefore, the basic assumption of the project, which translates into the activities undertaken in it, is to create an effective system of professional activation, which consists of professional pre-orientation processes, education preparing for work and activities supporting employment and job retention. Practical activities starting from learning about professions, through meetings with a career advisor, taking part in supported internships, to an internship and finally full-fledged employment on the open labor market. The target effect of the project activities was to develop a path through which our students and graduates would be able to complete a fully paid professional internship and then find permanent employment. For research purposes, one of several vocational training courses undertaken in the project was selected - office archivist assistance. This resulted from the most advanced work in this area, both in terms of preparation at the school stage and in the organization of cooperation with the employer. In this case, it was the District



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Labor Office in Sosnowiec, with which we have been building close relationships and involved in our activities from the beginning of the project. This choice is completely purposeful also due to the role played by the Office in the entire job activation and placement system. The involvement of this entity may constitute a significant starting point for further activities aimed at developing the openness and readiness of the labor market to employ people with more severe intellectual disabilities.

This study is a picture of educational research in action, accompanying our students on their journey from...being a student of a school preparing for work, becoming an intern and then an employee open labor market.

Educating a student with more profound intellectual disability: theoretical and methodological assumptions

Theoretical assumptions

The aim of educating students with intellectual disabilities at a deeper level "is to build their identity, develop their autonomy and sense of dignity, introduce them to social functioning and to understand and perceive social norms, and in particular, equipping him with skills and knowledge that will enable him to exercise - to the extent of his individual capabilities - his freedoms and human rights, and will also enable him to perceive himself as an independent person."¹ The educational objectives presented in this way in the currently applicable core curriculum for general education for students from... moderate or severe intellectual disabilities in primary schools are a priority for modern special education. The education of people with more severe disabilities, understood in this way, is undoubtedly influenced by contemporary concepts of disability, such as: the affirming model of disability, the model of inclusive education, concepts of disability culture, and paradigms of normalization and emancipation. Person from with a moderate or severe intellectual disability is a full member of society. It is a person who, although subject to constitutional limitations, should have the right to participate in social life that will be guaranteed by the world around him, and not that he will gain for himself. Of course, we should not succumb to the illusion that all people with intellectual disabilities can function completely independently and be completely autonomous. In the current socio-cultural conditions of our country, actions to support and support the

¹ Core curriculum for general education for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities in primary schools



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independent functioning of this group of people are still necessary. It is difficult to determine whether it will be possible to completely withdraw them in the future. The experience of other countries, especially Iceland in this project, shows that there is certainly a long way ahead of us. There is no doubt, however, that a large number of people with more profound intellectual disabilities are able to live independently and attempt to find employment with little support. However, this requires a long process of targeted, intensive actions, which is why it is important to realistically and look reflectively at the capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities. In an ideal world, each person has the necessary potential and opportunities to live independently, but this world is still under construction, and this project adds many important "bricks" to it.

In the considerations and actions resulting from them, we should not forget that for years the thinking and perception of a person with intellectual disability was placed from a medical (individual) perspective, and I functioning was perceived in a biological aspect, then "a mentally disabled person is perceived as an individual who cannot be helped in the sense of effective rehabilitation, because it involves interference with the biological structures of the body"². This places a person with intellectual disability on a deeper level as an individual who requires care and institutional support. Of course, there are people in this group who need constant support. However, when we consider intellectual disability only from this perspective, we consider it in terms of its mental state. We then focus only on personality traits. It is known that in the clinical picture cognitive functions are reduced. However, the clinical picture does not translate directly into the functional picture, which, as modern research shows, is determined to a much greater extent by environmental variables than by individual ones.

In the biopsychosocial concept, intellectual disability can be considered, among others: through the triad proposed by Małgorzata Kościelska. The author

² Z. Gajdzic, *Educational contexts of helplessness...*, s. 43.

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shows intellectual disability in three versions: the impaired self, handicapped mind and handicapped life. The factors presented above are interconnected close relationship and, importantly, determine the dependencies between them, which have a huge impact on functioning of a disabled person. A disabled life is influenced by a disabled self or a disabled mind and vice versa. This emphasizes the above-mentioned importance of the environment for the actual level of functioning of the individual while taking into account the biological component. However, whether biological conditions, which cannot be ignored, will have the final significance for the development of an "impaired life" and further an "impaired self" are largely determined by environmental and social factors. Contemporary concepts and definitions of intellectual disability developed by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, starting with Ruth Luckasson and her team, are also being developed in the same direction.

When thinking about a person with intellectual disability, we can focus on the continuum "determining the scope of support and care and the scope of opportunities for social participation of these people."³ The category of social participation is the overarching category that is supposed to determine the goals of today's education. Self-service is not enough nowadays, and "the goal of modern revalidation is much broader and applies to all degrees of disability. This includes:

- neutralization of developmental dysfunctions,
- learning to compensate for other dysfunctions,
- improving the functioning of the entire body,
- preparing disabled people for the learning and upbringing process,
- preparation to perform social roles and function in the community society,

³ Kijaks.23

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- starting a professional job.”⁴

And most importantly, "we do not divide the patients into those worthy and not worth the rehabilitation effort,"upbringing“, adaptable or not.”⁵

What was an important element of the implemented project was the assumption that people with more profound intellectual disabilities have the opportunity to take up professional work, but this requires preparing them not only for these requirements, but also the environment to welcome this group of people despite their personal limitations.

Adults with more profound intellectual disabilities are a specific group. Adulthood for them and their surroundings is defined differently than for people with an intellectual norm. Taking into account the reduced intellectual level and immature cognitive and emotional pattern, these people require support and companionship on the path to growth. However, in the 21st century, comprehensive support for people with more severe intellectual disabilities is important in the process of socialization, upbringing and education, not only through individually targeted interactions but also through broad social activities. This support is illustrated in adapting, harmonizing and normalizing the living environment of these people. Areas of support for people with intellectual disabilities can be divided into three groups. The first one is: independent apartment. The second is starting a family, and the third area is work. It is understood as active participation in an environment that goes beyond known social structures. Professional activation for people with more profound intellectual disabilities begins at the level of job training school. Work preparation and job familiarization classes are carried out as part of the subject: work preparation resulting from the framework teaching plan for a special school preparing for work.

Methodological conditions

⁴ Krause, s.47

⁵ Ibid., p.47

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This research project aims to verify the theoretical assumptions developed in the project and practical recommendations for organizing the process of professional activation of people with more profound intellectual disabilities. Due to the practical nature of the activities and the participatory dimension of the research conducted, a decision was made to embed the research methodology in the action research model. The research was conducted using the strategy of collective action research (2nd person action research), in which "Researchers work together to identify and research problems and choose ways to collect information that will allow for the development of solutions."⁶ Small groups predominate in this type of activity, and researchers or participants meet face-to-face. As the authors cited above write, the key idea is to conduct research "with people" and not on people.⁷ This allows for the abolition of barriers between researchers and people constituting the subject of research, abolishing the specific inequality of this relationship, which allows the presentation of the experiences of these people without usurping the right to name, define or finally evaluate them. Direct involvement in research gives participants the right to understand and speak about the situation in their own language, but also on their own behalf. This is extremely important due to the nature of the social determinants of the functioning of people with intellectual disabilities. For many years, numerous treaties and charters establishing the rights of people with disabilities have been ratified, and at every university educating people to work as students and adults with disabilities, the proud words of the Treaty of Salamanca "Nothing about the disabled without the disabled" are heard, and at the same time, in practice, these people very rarely they have space to speak about themselves and on their behalf. In the above context, the methodology of collective action research was adopted.

Action research in practice means planned cyclical activities starting from planning, through the implementation of action (change), observation and evaluation, after drawing conclusions in order to re-plan, implement, observe and draw

⁶ Góral, Jaloča, Mazurkiewicz, Zawadzki, 2019, p.47.

⁷ There.

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conclusions. These cycles are repeated until solutions that meet the assumed goals are developed, i.e. until real change is achieved. You can imagine such a cycle going on forever, because there will always be something that can be improved, a change that will be more complete, broader and more comprehensive. As Hilary Bradbury writes, "(...)action research is united by the vision of bringing people together to create transformative knowledge. According to her, action research is a methodology of hope in which researchers engage in social processes to renew and regenerate scientific research aspirations."⁸ In this context, it can be assumed that a certain boundary point of repeating cycles is a certain saturation of researchers with the subject and subject of research, reaching the point of personal understanding of the ongoing processes. In this context, it can be assumed that not only the direct result of the research is important, but also the personal experience of its participants and their personal development. This methodology is consistent with the Design Thinking methodology adopted in the project as a model for developing solutions.

The planned action research, as previously indicated, is focused on the process of professional activation of a group of students with more severe disabilities in cooperation with the District Labor Office in Sosnowiec.

During subsequent activities undertaken as part of the "AION" project, in cooperation with PUP Sosnowiec, we created a place of supported internships for the 2nd grade of the job preparation school at ZSS4. After an initial diagnosis of cognitive and social skills, 7 students were selected. It was important that these students were physically and cognitively independent. Due to their computer skills, 3 students from the selected group were assigned to computer archiving of documents. Two students were assigned to sorting documents and 2 students were responsible for document destruction.

⁸ Ibid., p. 52



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Planning activities, including the allocation of tasks, was a long-term process of getting to know ourselves and gradually developing optimal solutions, taking into account not only the personal predispositions of our students and PUP employees, but also their interests, will to act, and willingness to engage in specific activities. Moreover, this assignment also took place in cyclical tests of individual tasks, which were then evaluated until the optimal selection of workstations suited the needs and capabilities of students. PUP employees also participated in this process, actively adapting work stations and activities recommended to students.

The action research methodology does not impose any rigid framework regarding data collection methods and techniques. Therefore, the research used participant observation, individual and group interviews, and analysis of source materials.

District Labor Office in Sosnowiec – tasks in the research process

Tasks and activities of the Labor Office.

First, the Office decided to cooperate and all necessary formalities were carried out. This also involved learning about the specific nature of the school and the functioning of students. For the vast majority of employees, it was their first meeting with people with intellectual disabilities. It was necessary to meet ideas, often stereotypes, about people with disabilities in real life. Meetings organized at school, such as joint integration activities, helped in the "decision to cooperate". These meetings were attended by office staff, teachers and students of the school. For this purpose, a series of workshops was organized under the slogan: "With professions for your brother." Students learned about professions such as: cook, florist, baker, dog walker and others.



At school, as part of our cooperation, we organized meetings with an official careers advisor, during which various activation methods were used, e.g. "vocational puns", which were intended to integrate communities, but also to introduce students to the world of work.

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Professional puns:



An important task for the Office's employees was to search for tasks and professional activities that could be performed by people with intellectual disabilities.



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A CHALLENGE for the office: *professional activities were performed in real terms on the labor market, not only in the employment office.* The District Labor Office has set itself a goal to ensure that, as a result of the actions taken, it will be possible to work in various institutions in the long run. In the initial phase of cooperation, the management asked department managers to write down a list of repetitive, simple activities performed in individual departments. **WITH fears** that the office faced at that time was: *find universal professional tasks, repeatable with other employers and teach activities useful on the open labor market, as well as looking at each other in professional work through the prism of skills, not disabilities.*

The long-term goal set by PUP is to enter the open labor market and create:

- positions for people with intellectual disabilities in the public sector, as a standard;
- opening of the private sector to people with intellectual disabilities

The next step of the District Labor Office was to prepare employees through a participatory management model. The model was implemented by creating a team of internship supervisors - a request for employees to volunteer and alleviating employees' concerns - the care was provided by school staff.

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Special School Complex No. 4 in Sosnowiec – implementation of educational research in action. Organization of supported practices.

The aim of the AION project was to develop a coherent and systemic strategy to support the employment of people with intellectual disabilities on the labor market in cooperation with the District Labor Office in Sosnowiec. However, above all, developing a professional development path and a strategy for inclusion in an open and/or protected labor market, taking into account the educational framework. The school's goal was to increase the effectiveness of vocational education through professional activation.

Conceptualization of research - research goals and questions, methodological assumptions of the project

This gave us the opportunity to develop together **educational action research** With teachers, students and office workers. Action research "is an organizational form of research in changing practice, in which the practitioner (teacher, social worker, organizational leader, etc.) is both a researcher and an organizer of change."⁹

Did we want to change the "look" at the professional activation of people with intellectual disabilities?

The answer is: YES

Did we want to change the image of a person with a more profound intellectual disability as an employee?

The answer is: YES

Why action research? Our goal is to combine theory with practice, and the "action research" procedure gives us the opportunity to learn about the phenomenon, in this case, of professional activation of people with deeper intellectual disabilities and to change the perception of current activation. The strategy of "cognition and change promotes the integration of thinking and action, reflection on and in action, and improvement of professionalism"¹⁰. Action research can be visualized as follows:

⁹ M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, Research in action, in: Basics of research methodology in pedagogy, ed. Stanisław Palka, Warsaw 2010, GWP, p. 321

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 320

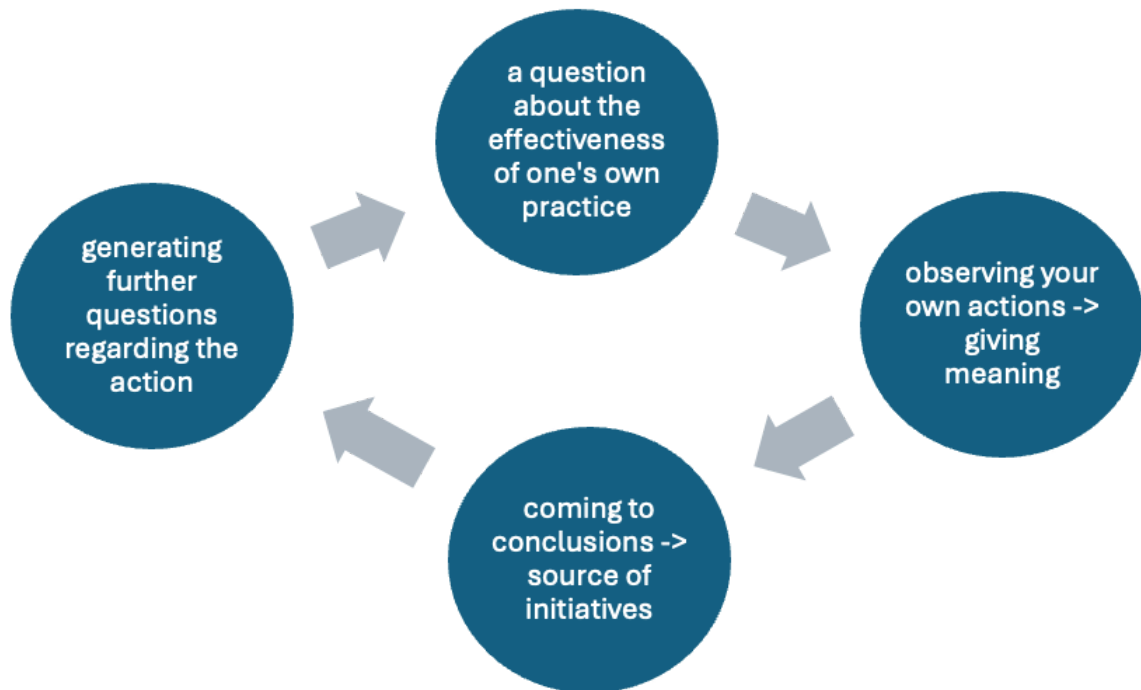


Diagram 1 source: based on: M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, *Research in action*, in: *Basics of research methodology in pedagogy*, ed. Stanisław Palka, Warsaw 2010, GWP, p. 320

Action research is "a strategy (...) that bears the hallmarks of a 'never-ending-story' with the researcher of his own practice in the main role."¹¹ The presented research procedure is a process. Considerations on action research of the AION Project will be based on the action research cycle according to Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak. It presents the cycle in four components:

1. Problematization/diagnosis
2. Concept/hypothesis/program
3. Implementations
4. Reflection/evaluation

¹¹ M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, *Research in action*, in: *Basics of research methodology in pedagogy*, ed. Stanisław Palka, Warsaw 2010, GWP, p. 321

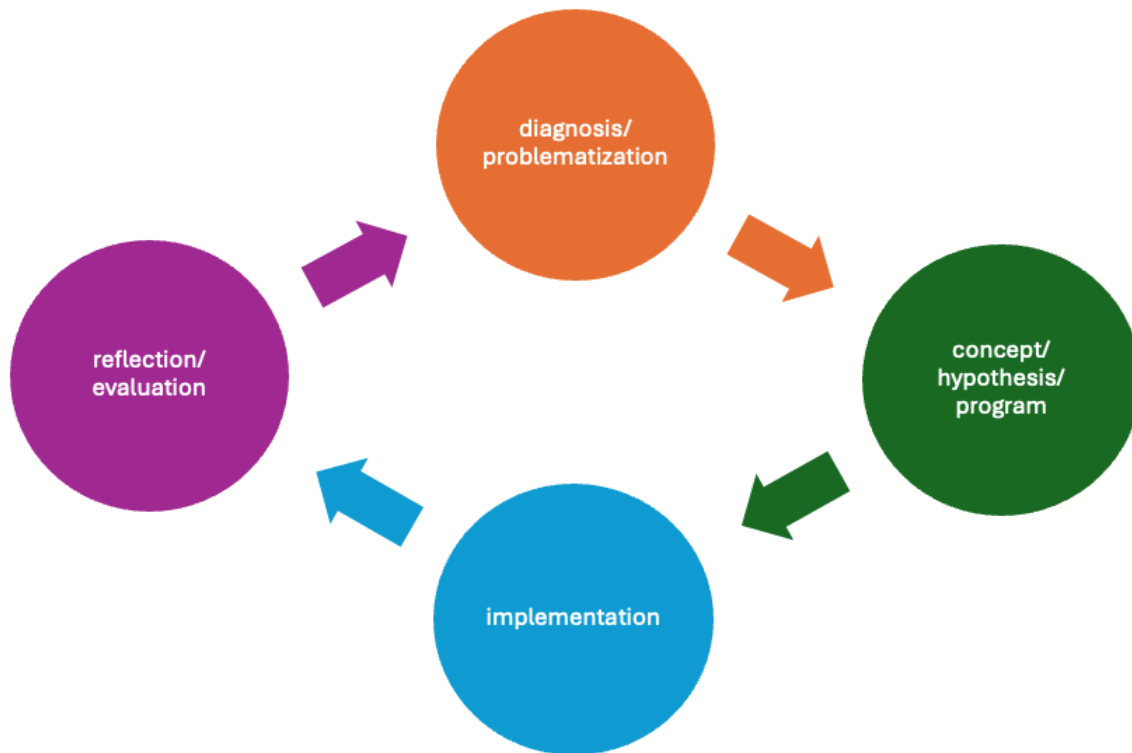


Diagram 2 source: own work

1. Problematization/diagnosis

Due to the lack of a systemic solution for the activation of people with more severe intellectual disabilities at the level of a job-training school. At the level of the social environment, work for people with more severe intellectual disabilities is an important factor in their development. However, activities on the open labor market are largely implemented by associations and foundations. However, these actions are not systemic in nature. That's why we wanted to combine education with professional development.

We selected students based on soft indicators such as their motivation and commitment. Another indicator was the students' manual skills (such as using scissors, stapling sheets of paper, or photocopying). Another indicator was the

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selected students' ability to read and write and focus. These were preliminary criteria because the supported practices were based on using a shredder, sewing documents submitted for archiving, arranging and sorting documents. In the first phase of the internship, we selected three students (Karol, Agnieszka and Jakub). Half a year later, 4 children joined us students (Patrycjusz, Kuba, Jakub and Przemek). They were mainly involved in sorting and preparing cards for destruction. The first group was prepared to archive documents by scanning documents into the system.



2. Concept/hypothesis/program

At this stage, the supported internship program was developed in detail, taking into account the individual needs of students. The key assumption of the program

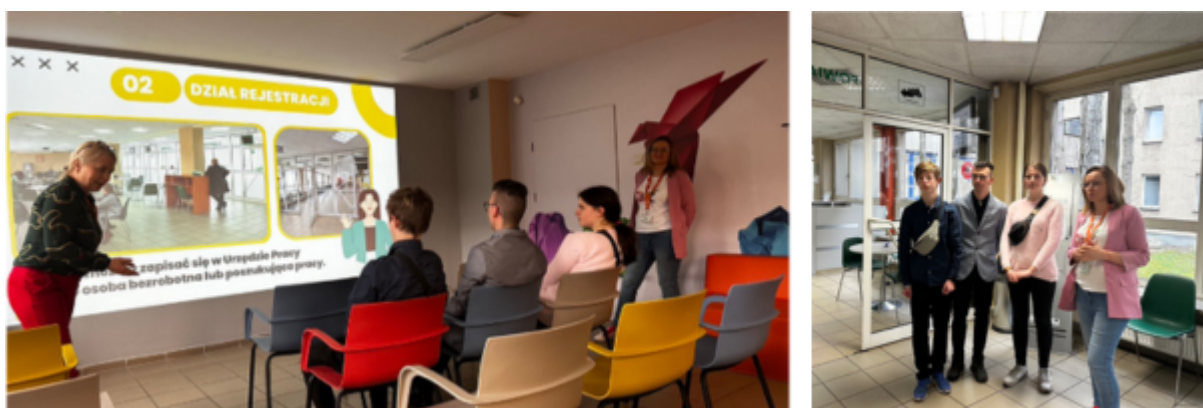
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was the structure and stability of activities in order to provide participants with a sense of security. Practical classes were held regularly on designated days - always on Mondays, from 10.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m., which allowed for building a routine.



3. Implementations

There were two implementations. The first one concerned the first group. Introducing the rules of work during professional internships, learning about the place of internship. First meeting March 2023.



First works:



4. Reflection/evaluation

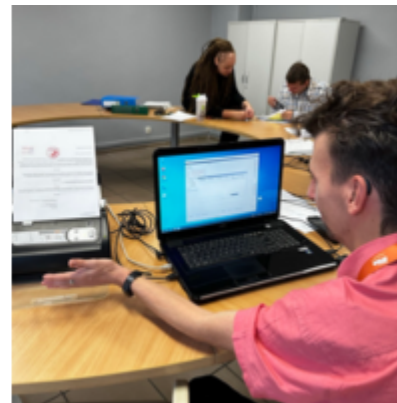
In June 2023, we carried out an evaluation. We checked what our group could do. What do we as teachers need to focus on in the new school year? The first group of students mastered professional skills well. Therefore, we decided, in consultation with the office, that we will introduce digital archiving training for this group from September 2023, and we will introduce a new group to carry out simple office work in the new year. The evaluation ended with the awarding of diplomas for completing 3-month supported internships.



Due to the fact that educational action research is circular in nature. Introduced from September 2023 **IMPLEMENTATION II**. We invited another group of

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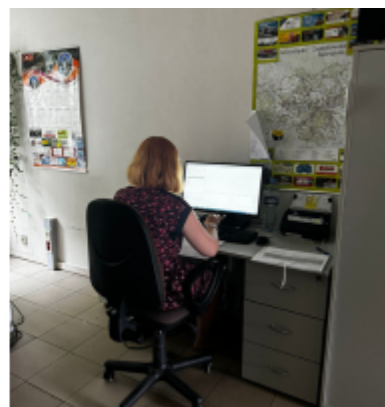
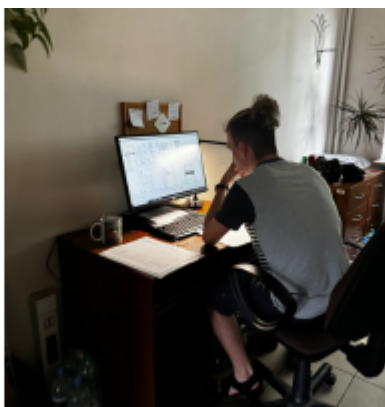
four people, described earlier in this study, to carry out supported practices. This stage lasted from September 2023 to April 2024. Students learned new skills, broader and more related to the actual workplace, in particular learning digital archiving.



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An ending that still goes on.....

Educational action research is not finally finished, from July 2024, for a period of 6 months, a professional internship of two participants who completed their education at the Special School Complex No. 4 in Sosnowiec will begin. This is the result of the implemented AION Project, which resulted in lasting cooperation between the Special School Complex No. 4 in Sosnowiec and the District Labor Office in Sosnowiec. Thanks to the implementation of supported internships, our students prepared to start an internship financed from PUP funds. Through the internship, which is to last until the end of 2024, they will prepare to start employment at the PUP as an archivist's assistant. The internship will be carried out every day from Monday to Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.



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