TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD STUDENTS

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Abstract

In the educational process directed at students, the responsibility for successful learning is divided between the teacher and the students. Both, the teacher as well as the students have to realize their own part of the responsibility burden. The teacher has to be aware that regardless of the fact that he/she invested a lot of effort into providing the students with quality knowledge, the students will not necessarily acquire the offered knowledge; proper conditions must first be created for that. A teacher’s responsibility within the educational process includes expertise in his own teaching approaches as well as his/her educational (rearing) style. There are several different theoretical concepts that provide teachers with plenty of opportunity to assess their own teaching styles (e.g. analytic – holistic, deep – surface, etc). One of the possibilities enabling a teacher to reflect on his/her attitude towards students is a model composed of three categories: demands, awards (praises) and punishments (reprimands). Teachers reflected on their educational (rearing) styles during teachers’ education, where they agreed to the existence of educational components in the educational process; first they assessed themselves, while afterwards also receiving feedback from each other. While making use of all three categories of the presented model, teachers have to be aware that despite their superior position within the social hierarchy, their attitude when communicating with their students should not be superior and critical. They should instead maintain their authority through emphatic communication suitable in a given situation.

Keywords: educational model, communication, teacher training

Introduction

Along with schooling, the school environment also includes educational processes. Although we perceive educational processes and the educational model as something comprehensive and long-term, they are based on small steps, such as day-to-day communication between parents and child at home and between teacher and child in school. The educational model is composed of individual words and sentences, which means that, to ensure successful education, the parents’ and teacher's talk should contain the right message and be communicated appropriately.

Knowing types of educational models and being aware of one’s own educational model, or one’s attitude towards students, is a component part of the pedagogical proficiency of teachers that should be subject to constant upgrading. This way, a teacher will maintain and upgrade...

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1 For the purposes of this article thus, “education” will be used to signify the (teacher’s) attitude toward a child/student, while “schooling” will imply solely the teaching and learning components of the educational process.
the quality of presenting knowledge and skills to others. All this is a result of the new roles teachers play and the changed perceptions of teacher competencies.

The new roles of teachers are being pointed out by various authors, e.g. Hirvi, Day and Niinisto (Razdevšek Pučko and Rugelj, 2006), who base their reasoning on changes in the society and the resulting changes in schools. They reflect on how certain roles teachers used to have so far have changed, while some others they either still need to change or discard. Teachers are losing their traditional function of being the sole source of information, which is why the authors particularly stress that teachers should become more open for change, as one of their newly assumed roles. Teachers are not, however, seen solely as the ones that should change themselves, but instead as a vehicle of change. Teachers are being ever more associated with the role of the mentor and organiser of learning processes, which is why they are inclined to perfect their methods and improve their lesson organisation.

One of the new teacher roles arises also from the learning organisation, where teachers are stimulated to develop personally as well as professionally; the teacher qualifications acquired during university studies have namely become insufficient. The increasing number of professional competencies one might yet acquire is why teachers are not exempt from lifelong learning.

Changes in the society are the source of learning, behavioural and multicultural diversity among students, posing numerous problems for teachers. In an attempt to achieve their teaching goals, they thus often have to undergo special training to be able to work with different participants and know how to adjust to them. To learn to be more tolerant toward various participants and to be able to solve disputes among them, and among participants versus teachers, one must be familiar with conflict management as well as be well versed in cooperating with other teachers and other professional staff of schooling institutions.

The end of a teaching process should include the teacher’s ability to reflect on, explore and question their own work. Along with the need for self-evaluation, which enables teachers to improve their teaching, outside evaluation is also gaining ground.

The changing of teachers’ roles and their assuming new ones demand a change in the methods of teaching. As opposed to being something a teacher did, teaching is beginning to focus more on students now. Such an approach naturally calls for more activity on part of the students, as critical and innovative thinking is encouraged, and underlines the practical side of teaching, where students are invited to use their acquired knowledge in unfamiliar circumstances.

Due to teachers’ changing roles and competencies, authors (Pušnik and Zorman, 2004) have markedly investigated teachers’ professional competencies. They have concluded that teacher qualities of a successful teacher can be divided into professional characteristics and professional competencies. Professional characteristics comprise professional values, professional and personal development, communication and relationships, along with synthesis and use. Professional competencies of a successful teacher, on the other hand, include knowledge and understanding, as well as skills. Knowledge and understanding further encompass the knowing of students and their ways of studying, professional knowledge of the taught subject, being familiar with the curriculum, educational system and teacher roles (ability to reflect, administrative chores, legal responsibility, team work). Finally, skills stand for the ability to plan content, time, materials and methods, all of which make up teaching
preparations, as well as teaching techniques, how to lead a class, how to mark and examine, and how to assume a more complex function.

The metacognitive dimension stimulates reflection on own learning and teaching, understanding, and the point of teaching and learning. The most difficult thing is to change the authenticity of a teacher's personality, which demands extensive self-training, carried out through counselling and therapy. A teacher's changing and growth depend on metalearning, stimulation of reflection on own teaching, understanding and the purpose of teaching, and have long-term effects on the educational process.

At teacher training courses, we encouraged teachers to reflect on their relationships with the students and thus made them think about the day-to-day communication between them. We focused on individual words and sentences making up the educational model. The teachers' starting point for own reflection was their commonly accepted premise that in order to achieve teaching goals, the role of educational processes cannot be overlooked.

**Educational model**

There exist various educational techniques to be used in schools or at home, all of which derive from various educational models. One of them is the three-part model, composed of three categories (Steiner et al, 2004).

The first category represents the demands or expectations one has of a child. Both in school and at home, a child is faced with certain expectations they are supposed to meet. In school this means rules such as clean the board after class or come to class on time, while at home similar expectations include taking out the trash and cleaning one's room. How many things are required of a child depends on the teachers in school and on the parents at home, although the two tend to be in discord regarding the quantity of their expectations. They can be either too demanding or too mild, while both extremes can affect the child's developing personality.

After the expectations and requirements have been successfully met, praise or a reward should follow; this represents the second category of the presented educational model. Praise and rewards tell the children which behaviour we expect from them, and help to build up the their positive attitude towards themselves. Exaggerating with praise and rewards does, however, not breed the desired effects, as it often results in a spoiled child. The absence of praise and rewards, on the other hand, could result in a child unsatisfied with himself, utterly trying to please the teachers and parents just to be commended.

The third category is criticism and punishment. A child should know which lines he cannot cross and be aware of the consequences of disobeying. Criticism and punishment tell the child when he has broken a rule or crossed the set lines. When children are criticised or punished, they should be made well aware of what they had done wrong. Extensive punishment can breed an aggressive child, while insufficient punishment regimes can result in children being spoiled.

Students should be equally exposed to all three categories. They should know the rules, what is expected of them and what sort of punishment awaits if they fail to live up to them. If students follow the rules and successfully completes their tasks, they will be commended.
Both praise and reprimand work best if the relationship between teacher and students is good and based on respect and trust. In most cases it is advisable to praise or reprimand a student in private, while it can only be done in front of the entire group if the classroom is pervaded by enough team spirit. Praise should be spontaneous, genuine, diverse, and should be directed at tangible merits of an achievement or activity. Praise should be bestowed on the level of progress made by a student and should not be used as a means of comparison with the others in the class. When praising somebody for an achievement, the emphasis should be put on the invested efforts and not solely on their skills, the simplicity of the task or pure luck.

Where students is already internally motivated to learn a certain topic, all they need is feedback to guide they further; in such cases, the teacher's praise or punishment do not account for much. An externally motivated student, on the other hand, especially one that fears failure, can gain from an appropriately communicated praise, though. The same goes for non-independent students who need the teacher to provide them with »social backup« and emotional support (Marentič Požarnik, 2000).

Teachers' communication with the students is affected by their internal psychological states, personality states, the so-called I-states that determine our behaviour and our communication. Depending on the prevailing I-state in teachers, their communication can be parent-like critical, parent-like protective, grown-up, child-like free, child-like flexible and child-like rebellious (Brajša, 1993).

The parent-like critical communication is characterised by prohibitions and criticism, by the person being judgemental of the work of others, giving predictions, speaking loudly and clearly with a frowned forehead and a lifted finger. The parent-like communication is typical of teachers who are protective of their students, who address them warmly and compassionately, have a worried face and spread arms. The grown-up communication involves teachers expressing their opinion, analysing the situation, speaking in a confident and non-biased manner with a clear expression on their face and standing erect. Teachers characterised by a child-like free communication are expressive of their wishes and needs, speak loudly and enthusiastically, and have a relaxed posture. The child-like flexibility communicates insecurity and fear, the person is shy and has an insecure and whining voice, while their face reveals a timid character. Teachers employing a child-like rebellious communication tend to oppose colleagues, the headmaster, students' parents, etc, whereby they act irritably, have a repulsive expression on their face and a stiff body (Brajša, 1993).

**Teachers' reflecting on their attitude towards students, and the results**

The reflection of teachers' attitude towards their students was studied within a programme of the Pedagogical education centre at the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, intended for teacher training. During the 2005/2006 school year, we organised seminars on communication and educational models for primary and secondary school teachers. Teachers' reflections on their attitude towards students were, however, studied a year prior to that, within the framework of other seminars, so that all in all we analysed some one hundred teachers as to their reflections.

The analysis of their reflections was carried out by means of a questionnaire that asked the teachers how much they demanded of their students, how much they praised them and how much they criticised them. They had to explain whether they set demands, award praise and...
criticise or punish several times a day or an hour, once a day, or just once a week. They inserted their findings into the circumplex model where they drew a “Mercedes sign” with lines of different lengths; if their answer was that they criticise several times a day, the criticism line was the longest, while if they, on the other hand, realised they were extremely unassuming, the shortest line was the one signifying demands and expectations.

The first part, where they determined their educational model, was followed by the second one, the feedback; after the teachers drew their own educational models, they each drew two others – for two colleagues from the same school whom they knew. They drew the models for others on the basis of knowing the other teachers’ attitude towards students, and thus on the basis of their subjective observations. After the three teachers had all finished drawing, they compared the models they drew of themselves with those drawn of them by their colleagues. In the majority of cases, the drawings were similar, signifying that the teachers were well aware of their educational model and that it was perceived as such by others as well.

Along with their own insight into their educational model, it was also the colleague’s reflection of the other teacher’s attitude towards students that showed the teachers which communication they make use of too often or not enough. If all three lines were almost level, it meant that the teacher’s actions during the school day (or week) were well balanced. The analysis showed, however, only a tenth of all the teachers to think of themselves as being demanding, praising and critical in a proportionate manner. In the most common drawing, the longest line was the one representing the setting of demands, the somewhat shorter one representing criticism, while the shortest spoke of the teachers’ sparing praise and rewards. Such drawings testified to the teachers using a prevailingly parent-like critical communication, with emphasis on demands imposed on students, as well as to an extensive use of prohibitions and criticism. The child-like free communication was somehow in the minority, and so were the teachers’ associated enthusiasm and praise.

Reflections on their attitude towards students showed them schematically if they demanded too much of their students or not enough, if they were too strict or too indulgent. This helped them to become more aware of their attitude towards students and to realise they can balance and thus perfect it. Paying attention to their attitude toward students can also enable them to achieve better teaching results. Being aware of their critical, rebellious and flexible communication paves the way for a successful and quality teacher communication. By recognising their own way of communicating and that of their partner in a conversation, teachers come in control of their communication, learn to adjust to the student and respond in the most appropriate manner.

When using these three categories, however, teachers should control themselves and, irrespective of their socially defined hierarchical role, refrain from acting superior and being critical of the student. They should instead strengthen their authority through emphatic communication appropriate to the given situation. Teachers have at the training courses also not failed to stress that communication with the students should be based on mutual respect.

**With elements of good communication towards an efficient educational model**

Knowledge of educational models ensures a wider base for establishing quality relationships between teacher and student. In concrete situations, when teacher and student are in dialogue, what is important is to establish a quality line of communication. The messages teachers send
to students can be realistic or unrealistic, positive or negative. When communicating with people, we try to only use realistic messages. These can be positive when we commend something we like about a person, or negative when we criticise what we dislike in a person’s behaviour. We make use of realistic criticism of a person’s behaviour when we want them to start behaving differently. When we like and approve of the way a person behaves, we express a realistic praise; this will stimulate the person to continue to behave in the liked manner and thus adopt it as their own (Gordon, 1983).

At teacher training courses dedicated to educational models, teachers also emphasised the role of parents and their wish to share with them their responsibility as educators in school. They stressed they would like to cooperate with them more closely and establish a two-way communication. Through the teachers’ reflection of their attitude towards students, we have, however, ascertained, that teachers tend to be mostly parent-like critical and communicate through prohibitions and criticism, as well as be judgemental of the work of others – this implies an often defensive posture in relation to the students’ parents. As a result, parents assume the parent-like critical communication strategy as well, which does, though, not lead to dialogue, but rather to conflicting exchanges.

The way to an improved relationship between teachers, students and parents is adult communication (Brajša, 1993), when teachers and parents express their opinions, analyse the situation, and speak in a neutral manner, without criticising and repeated accusations. At teacher training courses, teachers like to point out that parents should also be invited to take part in the process and give suggestions and that a form of communication between them should by all means be established. It is namely often the case that due to the teacher shying away from dialogue with the parents and being reluctant to hear their suggestions, parents turn to headmasters and thus cause new communication problems.

Teachers at teacher training courses also stress the importance of schools for parents and that schools should be organised as soon as at pre-school or nursery level. The parents’ trust in institutions does not begin to build when their child enters primary school – it is based on their previous experience with the educational institutions and nurseries, social centres, etc.

Children’s reactions cannot be interpreted correctly without knowing their family background. It is therefore vital that we establish a good communication with their parents and try to decipher what is the level of demand, praise and criticism children face at home. A teacher who, for instance, gives a student an encouraging pat on the shoulder and is then slapped in return, would decode the student’s reaction faster if she knew his/her parents use corporal punishment as a constituent part of raising their child and that the child is thus very sensitive to touch, perceiving it as a physical treat.

Teacher-parents communication can assume many forms, such as the open door day at school, telephone conversations, emailing, parents’ meetings and others. Along with the parents receiving an update on their child’s progress in school, these meetings are also an opportunity to exchange useful information, such as the child’s interests and aptitudes. Such exchanges are likewise a chance for the teacher to learn of the children’s family dynamics and of the factors explaining their behaviour, as well as a chance for the parents to actively participate in the educational process and endeavour to reach a consensus with the teacher on the commonly adopted objectives, etc (Kottler and Kottler, 2001). Such contacts can result from the school system encouraging regular and planned meetings of teachers and parents, they can be
initiated by parents who begin to sense a problem, or by a teacher inviting the parents to help him/her resolve a problem their child has in school.

**Conclusion**

Reflections of own educational style were carried out during teacher training courses, where teachers confirmed the existence of educational components in the teaching process and discovered which categories prevail in the teacher’s attitude towards students – first they each reflected on themselves and were then given feedback also from their colleagues. The teachers taking part in the teacher training courses also agreed that, along with being familiar with educational models and one’s own attitude towards students, it is also crucial to look for several other factors conditioning the building of quality relationships with their students.

Teachers point out that in the education and schooling process focused on the student, the responsibility for the teaching and learning success rests equally divided on the shoulders of teacher and student. In debates on education, teachers also stress that their competence as regards education is too limited and that, with all the work they are burdened with when they assume the responsibility of schooling children, there is not enough time to educate. They also underline the fact that they should learn more about education themselves and that more pedagogical topics should find their way into school conferences. They expect institutions to provide more pedagogical training, unified opinions regarding education and methods of teaching within teaching collectives, and more support from counselling services. Schools should, further, provide teachers with safety and protection.

It is vital that both teachers and students realise their share of responsibility in the pedagogical process. Teachers should also be aware of the possibility that even though they might do their best to provide students with quality knowledge, the latter might not get across. By trying, though, they might prepare ground for success.

**Literature:**