

THE ROLE OF THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CLIMATE IN THE SCHOOL CLASS

Teodor Gergov

South-West University "Neofit Rilski" (Bulgaria)

Abstract. This article is an attempt to define the concept of “psychological climate” and to search for its specific dimensions in a classroom environment. A brief etymological retrospection and rationale of the significance of the construct have been provided. Its main components have been outlined and their role in enhancing the effectiveness of the educational process have been pointed out.

Keywords: psychological climate; school class; educational process; effectiveness

The effective realization of the educational process is one of those problematic issues of learning that have been discussed since antiquity (Velikova, 1998). It is a topical issue today that is bringing about even more intense discussions. A number of concepts, scientific works and theories are devoted to the issues of effectiveness in the learning environment. The focus of this article falls on the psychological dimensions of this environment and the ways they determine the overall process. For Nikolov, Aleksandrova and Krastev (2007) one of the main tasks of pedagogical psychology is studying those regularities in the educational process that form the optimal psycho-climate within the school community. From a psychological-pedagogical point of view, it is important to clarify the term “psychological climate” and why it is in the scope of attention rather than some word combinations such as “psychological microclimate”, “psychological atmosphere” and “psychological environment”. There are a lot of common features between these concepts, so that it is highly likely that a false impression that they are completely identical may be made. Psychology uses each of these terms, but a semantic difference is observed with them.

In the English psychology literature, the prototype of the term “psychological climate” in the educational process is “classroom climate” or “class climate” – literally, the climate in the classroom. It is a complex constellation of the intellectual, psychic, emotional, communicative, motivational, aesthetic and ethical-moral factors in which the learners perform their learning activities, acquire socio-historical experience, develop their personal communication skills, make friends, share common ideals and values (Amborse et al., 2010).

Desev (1999; 2006) distinguishes between “psychological climate” and “psychological atmosphere”. “Psychological climate” is considered as an integral psychological

characteristic of the social community reflecting lasting human relationships and a stable state of group or collective awareness, a motivation structure and emotional direction of the common activity. The psychological climate has a relatively stable, dynamic and balanced system of dominating and typical of the members of the community social feelings, mutual expectations and aspirations that directly influence on the individual and collective ability to work, their creativity and achievements. It is a qualitative feature in the trinity of cognitive, emotional and behavioral manifestations in the various forms of social interactions.

The psychological atmosphere is part of the psychological climate and humans might be unaware of it. Although it lasts longer than the instant, non-continuous social-psychic reactions, still, it has a variable character and it may be one in the morning, another during the day, and quite different in the evening. The concept of “psychological atmosphere” reflects the integral state of the social psyche in the group or the community, their more dynamic (compared to the psychological climate) common characteristics that is a combination of ways and forms of psychological expression. The psychological atmosphere characterizes the collective relationship for a significantly shorter period of time. Thus, the concept is differentiated as temporal, labile, rapidly variable and fluctuating in relation to momentary causes, situations and events. The individual psychological equivalence of the psychological atmosphere are the temporary psychic conditions of the person, and the psychological climate – the persistent psychic properties of the personality (Desev, 1999: 2006).

The psychological microclimate is another similar concept, but it also requires some clarification. If we extrapolate the term from ecology, it becomes clear that the microclimate is closely related to the influence on the individual and the small group due to the change of the mean factors. It can be suggested that the term “psychological microclimate” should be referred to the group or individual interactions within the class as a case in point, i.e., the individual relationships between certain constituent elements of the group and their juxtaposing, but not as its whole scope. The microclimate is irrelevant to the time parameter which divides the psychological climate to a longitudinal one and the psychological atmosphere to the temporal ingredient in the educational process. With the microclimate, the difference is in the quantity, with an emphasis on the personal and subgroup relationships within this learning community.

The last element associated with the rest of the terms is the “psychological environment”. The semantic definition from a psychological point of view belongs to the environmental psychologists who consider the concept within the material factors, such as: temperature, humidity, solar radiation, wind, atmospheric pressure, ionic balance, rainfall, electromagnetic fluctuations, noise, air pollution, light, color palette, architectural and ergonomic design, etc., that surround the person and how they, in their isolation or integrity, determine the person's behavior. One of the most popular formulae in psychology belongs to Lewin (1943), who believes that behavior (B) is determined by the person (P) and the environment (E). The equation $B = f(P, E)$, i.e., the personality and the environment are a function of our behavior which refers to the Behavioristic view of human behavior, where this formula has broad approval (Baum, 2008). In this way, it is argued that the environment is a key factor in

the concept of “psychological climate” considering the influential relation of the material devices, structure and form in the human behavior motivation.

The brief historical retrospection takes us to Tolman (1948), one of the first authors to look at the psychological climate, within his theory of “cognitive maps” organizing. A drawback of his conception is that he restricts this concept to individual perceptions, while Lewin, who develops this idea qualitatively, assumes that the atmosphere or the climate of each group can be defined as the shared perceptions of the people or how the individual cognitive maps are similar to one other.

According to Desev (2006), the psychological climate is polarized into positive and negative, also called “good psychological comfort” and “bad psychological comfort”. All well-known pro-social peculiarities that are the emanation of civic and democratic self-awareness in the historical and civilization development of mankind, such as empathy, trust, honesty, friendship, assertiveness, mutual help, justice, tactfulness, attention, tolerance, solidarity, etc., belong to the good psychological comfort. These “atoms” of beneficial human communication and attitude are the desired personal qualities that make the person noble and perfect.

As a bad psychological comfort in the learning environment are considered all the concentrated antisocial behavioral aspects that dehumanize, desocialize, and respectively degrade the personality and the group. Examples of a negative status quo of such educational discomfort are: hostility, aggression, conflict, narcissism, psychopathy, lack of tactfulness, isolation, bullying, etc. Kalchev (2003) notes that the final form of the unfavorable climate in a class is the victimization of some of its members. Bullying from peers in class and school is a direct and unquestionable component of destructiveness in the formation of the character and personality of every human individual. Bullying is a phenomenon that leads to breakdowns and compensations, directly affects the structures and conditions of the climate environment in the school class. Therefore, the good psychological comfort in the classroom is the result of the positive deontic setting, as the individual cognitive maps overlap in their perceptions in the pro-social view.

The psychological climate is a construct determined pluralistically whose components cannot be reduced to a single source (Bennett, 2001). Its central place are the teacher’s skills, abilities and professionalism. The pedagogical psychology traditionally perceives the educational process in the two-directional ‘teacher - learner’ scheme. On the other hand, different axes of interaction are possible, too, such as ‘teacher – group - learner’ (Nikolov, Aleksandrova, Krastev, 2007; Eneva, 1995); ‘faculty/school board – learner’ and ‘learner – learner’ (Amorse et al., 2010); ‘parent – teacher – student’.

Regardless of the schematic perspectives, the professional and personal skills of the teacher are crucial in the educational process management. The successful building of a favorable and fruitful psychological climate in the classroom is the good pedagogue’s immediate task as well as a source of satisfaction in his professional activity (Piryov, 1976). The professional satisfaction can also be perceived as the ratio of the types of teachers to their pedagogical orientation. Sorok-Rosinski and Kostinyashkin reached a conclusion that there

are three types of teachers based on the style of behavior, the characteristics of the teacher's character, and one's attitude towards work.

Teachers – theoreticians: for them, the professional preparation, the conceptual apparatus and the knowledge of the subject matter of the particular school subject is of paramount importance. Therefore, the theory-oriented teachers will be highly satisfied with their work if the attained level of theoretical knowledge by their students corresponds to their pedagogical orientation.

Teachers – realists: they have broad views and orientation skills in the surrounding world (objects and people), in the moods of the learners, which is where the satisfaction from their work comes from.

Teacher – artists, intuitionists: it is especially important for them to practice, reinforce and repeat the teaching material. Their satisfaction comes from inspiration, intuition and enlightenment in the cognitive activity of learners (After Eneva, 1994).

Another essential aspect of the pedagogical activity of the teacher is his/her style of communication and leadership. It is of crucial importance for achieving the desired psychological comfort in class, and in this regard Bierman (2011) raises the idea of the teacher influence as the “invisible hand” in the classroom, which unambiguously hints at the type of leadership the teacher needs to perform. In this sense, White and Lippitt (1960) found out that the impact of the democratic style of leadership in the educational process was the most effective one. They compared the liberal (*laissez-faire*), authoritarian and democratic styles in experimental environments and took into account the dependencies. It was found out that the liberal style was sporadic, disorganizing, less work was done and the students' dissatisfaction was confirmed in the series of interviews after the experiment. However, the authoritarian style has its disadvantages concerning hostility and aggression. In post-experimental interviews, Lippitt and White (1960) asserted the students' preference to follow the democratic style of their teacher. Through it, children easily start valuable and numerous friendships where trust, mutual help and warmth are put to the fore.

The Democratic style is strongly supported by Nikolov, Alexandrova and Krastev (2007) as the natural environment in which the learners achieve at maximum their potential in personal, academic and pro-social sense. Its characteristic component is changing the pronoun “I” with “us”, i.e., neglecting selfishness and focusing on the group welfare and development. Respect and belief in the abilities of the learners is the catalyst for success and creativity. The principle values of the democratic style to which the teacher must adhere are friendliness, empathy, care, tolerance and dedication. The teacher must consciously interact with the pupils based on positivism in order to make them confident that difficulties can be overcome, the tasks can be solved and they (the students) can cope with anything (Desev, 2006).

The psychological climate is the cultivating environment, the beneficial soil in which the effective educational process springs, but not only as a learner's success, but also as a self-realization of the teacher's professional and personal skills. Achieving a harmonious interaction is essential and, in this sense, Tolstoy rightly noted that the personal and professional growth of the teacher is in direct correlation with the growth of the personality

of his/her students and of the community as a whole. Or as Piriyov (1976, p. 246) put it, “the student is an indirect educator of his/her teacher”.

Lasting and successful intellectual-emotional relationships create and activate the psychological climate in a learning environment. Their main dimensions are:

Pedagogical creativity – which is directly related to the organization of the educational process, the motivation and the formation of the personality;

Pedagogical observation – related to the ability to observe the invisible, latent in the students’ thoughts, emotions and behavior, and on this basis, to take preventive measures not to impair the effectiveness of the educational process;

Emotional stability and sustainability – without which it is impossible to practice the pedagogical profession, aiming at its high effectiveness. A good teacher inevitably has self-confidence, high self-esteem, dignity, mental and emotional flexibility to react to the changing situations in his/her profession.

Pedagogical tact – it provides the requirements of firmness and compromise as dialectical categories, synthesized in balanced discipline in the educational process. The skills of delicacy and assertiveness, the selection of the necessary tools and methods to solve the problems and the positive influence are the substantial aspects of the pedagogical tact (Sternberg & Williams, 2014; Nikolov, 2007).

Revealing these pedagogical qualities has crystallized in the belief that these professional attributes are the main domains to which professionalism and self-development of the teacher must adhere to.

It is important to point out in what conditions of interaction the effectiveness emerges and the development of the cognitive activity in the desired pro-social context is motivated. Piaget unambiguously elevated the “school cooperation” as the most important ingredient in the educational process. Nikolov (2007) supports the idea and proves it with the experiment conducted by Sherif. He found out that building a robust syncretic team was a function of introducing problem-solving tasks. The group’s need of each member’s abilities and individual sense of importance mobilizes and strengthens co-operation. The common goal, on the one hand, sabotages egocentrism, and on the other, develops a sense of duty and responsibility towards the reference group.

Bandura (1989, 2001) also advocates the importance of cooperation. Learning achievement, he says, is maximum when learners together include sharing learning and social success. It follows that such a cognitive scheme is beneficial in the context of life developing into pro-social activity and personal relationships. This concept evolved to the creation of a program for the development of the teacher’s qualities. The SSS (Student Success Skills) program is a strategy for the effective implementation of the learning process (Lemberger et al., 2011/12). The philosophy of this program is related to the shift from the instructive didactic approach to the dialectical communicative model of the educational process. And what is more, the program basic concepts are that the students learn and practice those skills and strategies that are in the direction of concern, support in an inspiring learning environment where mistakes and small advances are taken into account and in this

way the day by day development is revealed. The program is accompanied by a system for monitoring and diagnosing the individual components contributing to the development of pro-social qualities. The special built-in self-monitoring of the learners is a kind of self-reflection of the individual and the group about their status and development as individuals. The program has a professionally developed toolbox of tests, software, tasks, exercises; specific, precise and clear for each stage of development, tailored according to the periods of sensitivity. Over the past 50 years the SSS – program has drawn information from published experiments concerning the effectiveness of the educational process and supporting the pedagogue to form self-aware, responsible and motivated pro-social personalities.

The dualism of the pedagogical work is rooted in the dichotomy of emotionality / rationality (Allodi, 2010). These two basic vectors determine the learning process, and special attention should be paid to programs for improving the emotional intelligence. Such a program is offered by Goleman (2011), too. He firmly believes that the effective implementation of this construct in school solves a great deal of the obstacles that evolve from interpersonal communication. His program covers five main areas that improve the set of social skills:

Knowing one's own emotions – it develops the self-conscious perception of one's own feelings; Managing the emotions – regulating the feelings and their expression in an adequate form; Self-motivation – the ability to motivate for a goal; Recognition of the emotions of others – it gives a sense of empathy, solidarity and tolerance; Stable relationships – showing curiosity about the feelings of others in order to gain the necessary experience in improving social skills.

Goleman also describes a “creative conflict resolution” program for students from first to twelfth grade that achieves results regarding: less class violence, less verbal conflict, an atmosphere of concern, increased willingness to cooperate, improved communication skills, frustration resistance, orientation in complex tasks, self-control, etc.

It is clear that the psychological climate is a multidimensional construct in the range of which a number of elements are found. The convergence of factors differing in genesis and manifestation makes its description a real challenge. However, all authoritative professionals in the field dealing with this issue are unanimous about its essential importance for the ultimate effectiveness of the educational process.

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✉ **Dr. Teodor Gergov, Assist. Prof.**

ResearcherID L-2419-2015

Department of Psychology

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria,

E-mail: teodor@swu.bg