

Desirable Emotional Climate in School

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ABSTRACT. The article aims to identify several factors involved in the desirable affective climate in pre-university education. This approach offered us the opportunity to observe numerous clinical cases of students having experienced emotional distress due to the inefficiently managed institutionalized learning process. Subsequently, we aim to determine the aetiology of the emotional distress associated with the didactic act, including the main generators factors of the emotional students' distress, as well as some of the disturbing factors of the affective climate during the institutionalized learning process. Semantic analysis, qualitative analysis, and case study are some of the methodologies we used in this regard.

INTRODUCTION

Lots of pages, including mines, about the importance of the affective climate in the learning process, have been written, but the fact is not always sufficiently conscious or is sometimes even minimized. Considering appropriate to resume this topic, we attempted to have another approach: the students' and the educational specialists' perspective. One of our main objectives was to facilitate to the teachers and to the trainers we coordinate the declension of several specific reflections which could boost them to become more aware of the affective aspect of the didactic process.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Defined as „any process specific to living organisms that leads to permanent capacity changes and which is not due only to biological maturation or aging” (Knud Illeris, 2014, p. 22), learning is possible under certain conditions: internal (affective states, age, subjective situation) and external (learning space, society, and objective situation)” (ibidem, p. 23). Hereby, „acquisition is not just a cognitive process (ibidem, p. 28), and „ the stimulating function still has crucial influence. It is about how the situation is lived, what kind of feelings and motivations are involved, and therefore the nature and amount of mental energy mobilized. The value and sustainability of the learning outcome is closely related to the stimulating dimension of the learning process.”

Daniel Goleman's study, entitled *Emotional Intelligence*, imposed the rethinking of the entire teaching process, and of numerous other areas of activity. Corelated with that, as Howard Gardner pointed out (through his theory of *Multiple Intelligences*, 1983), beyond quantitatively measured intelligence, expressed by an IQ, there are many other much more important types of qualitative intelligences. A high IQ undoubled by IE does not help the human individual to achieve an optimal social and professional integration, nor does it guarantee the development of a product (be it intellectual or material) that is genuinely socially valuable.

Conversely, the possession of high levels multiple intelligences (and the awareness of that) imposes the owner as an indisputable landmark of the respective field, often labelled as a „genius” in that activity. Emotional intelligence does even more than that: it helps the owner to establish desirable relationships with the others, to easily integrate socially and professionally, meaning to be a desired and appreciated presence by the entourage, and to feel comfortable (either as feedback of what he offers, or as proof of his inner characteristic balance and harmony).

Transmitting knowledge whose finding is more and more „at a click distance” (away from the searcher, or far from the utterance of the subject sought through various search engines, unaccompanied by passion, by solicitude, by examples, even by a „story”, by an attractive „packaging” (for example, through the art of storytelling, by the playfulness of the exposure or the interactivity) is not a fact guaranteed by the specialized psycho-pedagogical training of the teacher, but is within the reach of any human individual equipped with a minimal erudition.

On the contrary, the teacher should prove the ability to inculcate to the subject of learning the desire for knowledge, the motivation for assimilating scientific knowledge in his specialized field (stipulated by the curricular provisions), and the pleasure to participate in its own training, the desire to learn and to progress through culture. But, in the top of all, the teacher should perform

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his ability to teach the student to learn, and, above even this desideratum, to make him aware of the applicability of this knowledge and the need to update it throughout his entire life.

Concurrently, it would be appropriate for the teacher to value the „lessons” he was given during his student days, regardless of whether they were felt - negative or positive -, because they remain paradigmatic in terms of humanity. The teacher should inoculate the students the ability to access the content of learning, the desire to ensure their personal learning progress, proving bonhomie, pragmatism, insisting on the formative character of teaching, and on the eloquence of the exposed topics, juggling with the ability to argue, ensuring the concordance between the recommendations and the conduct of the person who makes them, emphasising the love they contain, but also showing respect for the personal „lens” and pointing repeatedly to the person who is making value judgments about these things.

CONCEPTUAL BOUNDARIES

Distress, along with eustress, is one of the two forms of stress identified by Hans Seyle in 1949. The American researcher Albert Ellis, based on his vast clinical experience, formulated the binary model of emotional distress, dividing negative emotions into functional negative emotions and dysfunctional negative emotions. The classification criteria were: the subjective experience associated with emotion, associated beliefs, and the behavioural consequences of that emotion (Ellis and DiGiuseppe, 1993, in D. David, *Profile of emotional distress*, manual, 2000, RTS Cluj).

It should be noted that emotional distress correlates with self-efficacy. Consequently, students who live a high level of distress will have a low level of self-efficacy.

By *factors generating the emotional distress of the pupils* we understand those aspects that have as a natural consequence the occurrence of distress in the subjects of learning, through the deliberate or not action of the teacher. *Disturbing factors of the affective climate* include distress-generating factors but can be due to other subjects of learning and other sources (nonteaching staff, noise pollution, undesirable events, etc.) present in the institutionalized learning process.

Cognitive psychology studies show the importance of *emotional arousal* in learning. The mood accompanying learning is an important indicator of the learning performance (Kaplan, R. L., Van Damme, I., Levine, L. J., & Loftus, E. F. (2016). We summarize some of the conclusions of these studies.

- Intense emotions increase the chances of better remembering an event, but not necessarily accurate.
- Memories related to an emotional state will be better retained (encoded) due to stress hormones that ensure their strength. In addition, emotional memories will be remembered more often than neutral ones (updated) which means that they will be even better retained in the long-term memory, no matter if at each access the details of the memory could be modified.
- Negative feelings require focusing on problems and carefully monitoring the environment to gather information that are relevant to the situation. Students experience a positive emotion when no other problem requires their immediate attention. Positive feelings facilitate an individual's openness to a wide range of stimuli to seize new learning opportunities.
- Under conditions of severe emotional arousal or stress, people can focus almost exclusively on survival, on resistance and efforts to regulate their emotions. With this extremely narrow attention, the focusing process can lead to poor memory even for events caused by emotion.
- Under conditions of extreme stress, this narrowing of concentration of attention can lead to memory deficits and to a pronounced susceptibility to disinformation.

Qualitative analysis of some case studies

Wanting to be concise but also to induce reflections among the teachers, after the lecture of the in the bibliography of this article mentioned studies, as a consequence of our participation in various in this matter specialized trainings, and as a result of conducting own researches, as well as of the numerous clinical situations encountered in psychotherapy, we summarize the conclusions of some case studies carried out during the 2022-2024 period.

Our **goals** were:

- to identify the main generating factors for students' emotional distress and some of the factors disturbing the effective climate of the institutionalized learning process.
- to analyse the situations determining the emotional distress;
- to delineate semantically two concepts: "generating factor" for the emotional student's distress and "perturbing factor" of the affective climate during the institutionalized learning process.

Hypothesis

1. It is presumed that there are as well generating factors for students' emotional distress, as perturbing factors of the affective climate inside the didactical process, leading to a school failure.

2. It is presumed that there are several factors generating the student's emotional distress, revealed inside the teacher-student relation in an institutionalized environment.

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METHODOLOGY

Semantic analysis, qualitative analysis, case study.

The subjects of the case studies were middle school students, aged 11 to 13 years, monitored over 2 years. The students came from all urban areas, with good and very good school scores, integrated at their class level, involved in extracurricular activities with high performance (sports, robotics, arts). They presented themselves to psychotherapy accusing various clinical symptoms, among which we list: various somatic complaints, (tummy pain, especially before going to school), fatigue, irritability, anxiety before a test or a sample, lack of energy, sleep disturbance.

According to DSM V, these symptoms could be caused by anxiety disorder, which may then worsen into an anxious personality type and may even cause neuroses and psychoses.

Following the analysis of the situations, we identified the following symptom-trigger patterns, in fact, obviously unhappy practices, often involuntary, recurrent in psychotherapy, which constituted the basis of our present qualitative analysis.

1. Students subjectively internalize the duration of certain lessons as „interminable and boring” and enjoy when the teacher leaves the class, while at other subjects, they would like the lesson to last longer.
2. Students receive their homework on WhatsApp, one or two days after the lesson has taken place, on the reason that the teacher has forgotten to do it or that he did not have the tests collection on him. In this case, the subject found that he has been unnecessarily glad and that his present disappointment would have been much less painfully felt if the same thing had not been preceded by this later cancelled joy!
3. The teacher adds on WhatsApp, for weekends or holidays, new homework to those already given, claiming that the previous ones had been insufficient.
4. The resort ministry designs a holiday period as „ski holiday”, but, as a counterpoint to that, the teacher assigns a lot of homework tasks.
5. The teacher invalidates a student feeling about a subject, a literary creation, or an artistic product, not taking in consideration that a student may not have the same feelings as the teacher on a given aspect, and in the lack of a common life experience, the teacher *accuses the student to be wrong if a winter landscape brings him no joy*.
6. The student is faced with requirements that would confuse even the teachers, when he must determine the literary type of a text, based on a single characteristic, regardless that, in that specific case, the prevalence criterion is no longer operative: each method of literary exposure (description, narration or dialogue) occupies an almost equal text extent.
7. In assessing the solution of a homework, the teacher considers only the concordance with the *Teacher's Guide* or with the *Brainly* solving, stating even that these are his only landmarks. Even when it comes to the field of exact sciences, the multiple possibilities to solve a problem, the neglect of numerous other solutions to a problem can induce the student either confusion, either distrust in his logic, or, even more, indignation or revolt. Not to mention the case of socio-humanistic sciences, where students' creativity in dealing with a topic can be manifested in very various directions.
8. The teacher notifies the students about the items covered by an evaluative test, but when the moment comes, there are less than one fifth of the notified topics, the rest being unmentioned contents.
9. The teacher evaluates a scientific task a few days after it has been assigned to the students and assesses the solution in the most drastic possible way, despite that the periods called *A different type of school* or *The Green Week*, often followed by the periodic holiday, are offering to others colleagues the time to revise/redo it and to achieve a maximal mark.
10. A student is negatively labelled on his physical appearance, even though, intimately, he was intending to donate his capillary adornment to children with cancer for a wig. That student felt that his humanity and civic spirit have been mutilated. Each class, the same student had been asked by a teacher of some kind but not sports, to tie his hair in a ponytail.
11. The student becomes aware that the teacher looked in his backpack during his absence.
12. The student is asked to answer in the lesson class by class, but he is given a mark only when he makes small mistakes, while other colleagues are assessed and evaluated after solving only the homework or after performing not more than two good responses. Student's feelings are even more enhanced if he knows and retains the provisions of the *Student Statute* (2016), art. 7, paragraph k, on „the right to an objective and correct evaluation” and alin. l, on „the right to challenge the outcome of the evaluation of written works”.
13. Parents too often must buy several necessary auxiliary materials, but the student finds out that, for his own learning process, these materials are either almost useless or selectively used for more and more bushy homework. It is the same when parents are obliged to provide the student, for the class lessons, with a smartphone even more performant as their own. Teachers are ignoring or not considering that in the volume *Effects of the small screen on the child's mind*, present since 2008 in every Romanian school, the harmful character of spending time in front of any functional screen is clearly shown and blamed, because of the multiple potential harm: hypnotic effect, that is distinct from the

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electromagnetic waves, the unhealthy user's position, the impact on the joints of the phalanges, damages for his vision and even the possibility of confusion between virtual and reference reality, meaning the socio-historical one.

14. Moreover, what do students feel when they are asked to use their phones exclusively for didactic purposes but are harshly reprimanded if they do the same on their own initiative? The provisions of the same above-mentioned act (*Student Status*) encourage this practice (Art.15, par. g), without taking in consideration neither the students' frustration (some do not owe a smartphone, others do not have it on them, some do not have a functional one), neither the *Rules of Procedure*, prohibiting to the students to bring smartphones in school.
15. Students have been constantly encouraged/stimulated to develop their critical, divergent, lateral thinking, through an activating didactic technology and other teaching-learning strategies, but some teachers are not at all happy with the transfer of these cognitive skills when students logically and politely demand their rights.
16. Violating the *Student Status*, Art. 16, paragraph 6, where „Sanction of students in the form of reprimand in front of the class collective or school is prohibited in any context”, students are often threatened with a lowered behaviour grade or with parents' notification about some small deviations from school discipline.
17. A good student participating in other localities in officially authorized school contests is necessarily absent from his classes. Coming back, he is assessed about the contents he missed and, even more, accused that” You are missing a lot!”
18. A teacher promises the class that the students will not be moved from their benches during their (motivated) absence, but, unfortunately, he is not keeping promise.
19. The student is wrongly excused by the parent „on family grounds” to achieve a high-level project for a national or International Competition, although the agreement was, in fact, for scientific purposes.

These situations are grouped into the following clusters:

- to stimulate the co-participation and student's interest in learning activity (1);
- to manage homework activity (2, 3, 4);
- to perform school evaluation (7, 8, 9, 12);
- to ensure a fair teachers' behaviour during classes (17, 16)
- to cultivate in students critical and divergent thinking, creativity (5, 6, 14);
- to support the student in high performance activities (16, 18);
- to show respect for the student's human quality (10, 11);
- to guarantee an equality of opportunities (13).

These situations are effectively factors generating emotional distress for students. Controlling these factors could reduce the emotional distress he or she experiences in school.

Specialized studies consider that the most effective way to combat stress is to remove or reduce the sources of stress from the individual's acting environment. (Bogathy, 2007, p. 248). By daily analysing their behaviour and spontaneously empathizing with students, teachers could easily contribute to reduce the emotional distress experienced by students in school.

Reflections and recommendations

In an sincere effort to provide the subjects of learning with the most pleasant affective climate, we developed a guidebook that could help in raising awareness and reducing the number of factors that generate emotional distress. It aims to optimize the external learning conditions (cnf. Knud Illeris, *Contemporary theories of learning*).

Among the following, each cluster is detailed, corelated with a list of the reflections that may guide the teacher in conceiving his didactic act.

Guidebook

- Stimulating student's co-participation and interest for the learning activity
- Is the learning activity enough interactive?
- Which are the elements I could use to keep students' attention throughout the lesson?
 - Managing students' homework
- Are the students able to solve their homework alone?
- Solving the homework does not take more than a maximum of 30 minutes?
- Has the content of the homework totally been addressed during the class?
 - School assessment and evaluation
- Was the assessment/evaluation test designed based on a matrix of specification?
- Is the evaluation of students' knowledge and skills on a given topic the purpose of the evaluation test?
- Can the test items be resolved within the designated timeframe?
- Were the students participating in the evaluation present at the classes?
 - Fair behaviour of the teacher during classes

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- Do all students receive equal treatment during classes?
 - Encouraging students to develop critical thinking, divergent thinking, and creativity.
- Am I willing to listen to new ideas from students?
- Do I give my students chances to develop their creativity through my classes?
- Do I have an open mind to special ideas from students?
 - Supporting students in their pursuit of high-performance activities
- Do I encourage students to take part in various school competitions?
- Do I support children who are capable of outstanding performance?
 - Showing respect for the student's human qualities
- Do I consider the individual and age requirements of the student?
- Do I show real respect to every student?
 - Equity in equalizing opportunities
- Am I paying attention to the chances of each student?

CONCLUSIONS

If students experience negative emotions at school, they will be increasingly tempted to look for positive emotions in other sources, whose content we are often unable to test scientifically.

The affective state accompanying the learning process assumes an important role in assuring the quality and the solidity of learning. To avoid school failure, teachers should constantly have in mind to implement a favourable affective atmosphere for the students' learning process.

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