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The impact of teachers' communication styles on pupils' self-safety throughout the learning process

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Abstract

Over the last decade, numerous research studies have revealed the multiple roles a teacher must implement: trainer, communicator, developer and shaper of students' personalities, counsellor, and provider of secure learning environments for students, etc. The whole range of such roles is sustained by personality features.

Taking into account preadolescents' main characteristics, this paper attempts to reveal the impact that a teacher has upon students' safety in the learning process in terms of his/her unique communication style.

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1. Theoretical background

It is widely known that school is the institution where children acquire skills, abilities, and knowledge in different fields; they develop and shape their personality through the activity of learning. In the learning process, two main partners are involved: teacher(s) and pupil(s); each party has his/her own traits and goals; each plays different roles and has a different social status (Neacsu, 1999).

Teachers' roles are mainly performed through the didactic communication process.

Didactic communication is a process that involves both teachers and pupils and it has the following specific functions: the *informative function* - transmission of educational messages and teaching; the *formative function* - stimulation of pupils' thinking and imagination processes; the *educational function* - conveying educational impact on school groups in the area of cohesion and affirmation; the *evaluation and regulation function* (of the teaching-learning process); the *function of solving educational problems, etc.* (Şoitu, 2001)

During the didactic communication, the teacher demonstrates a specific communication style, able to define her especially in the area of social communication at a high performance level.

Communication style consists of individual characteristic features reflected in the communication act, and it refers to: specific ways of receiving / decoding messages; personal qualities of processing / interpreting messages; specific ways of expressing the response; personal particular traits of feedback.

The communication style relies on three elements: 1. *the person's attitudinal process* –the constant report of the subject to the others and themselves. 2. *the models of acquired communication tools*: assertive, non-assertive, and aggressive (with its passive-aggressive variant), manipulative. 3. *temperamental constitution*.

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Specialists in the field of communication have revealed four communication styles: non-assertive, aggressive, manipulative, and assertive. The *non-assertive style* is characterized by the tendency to hide or to run away, rather than face people. It can manifest itself through excessive kindness and conciliation, the tendency to postpone the decision-making process, handing over the right to decide to other people, and a morbid fear of being judged by others; an intense anger is felt at the prospect of possible failure – individuals prefer avoidance and obedience to others' decisions. The *aggressive style* is characterized by the tendency to be always present, to have the last word, to win at any cost, even if it causes damage or grief to others. The *manipulative style* is characterized by the preference for a backstage role, by the tendency to wait until the opportune moment comes, and by the tendency to look for any hidden intentions behind others' statements; The *assertive style* is characterized by the ability of self-assertion, honest and direct approaches in personal speech, accompanied by ability to provide straightforward opinions without aggression and without harm to others, pursuing their interests without violating the others' needs.

The didactic communication process is achieved in classrooms. The classroom environment has a lot of dimensions: ergonomic, psychological, social, normative, operational and innovative. Recent studies have revealed that the classroom environment has to be secure, proper and adequate for pupils' development. In a secure environment, each pupil will develop his/her own self-safety strategies and the school failure events will decrease.

Self-safety is connected to building original trust (a concept developed by Erikson). Original trust is critical to individual development, it can help people to adopt a full attitude of self-confidence, showing courage in facing difficulties, or it will distort behaviour so that any change will fray.

There are three types of self-safety: a) the *security requiring type* is characterized by constant exposure to dangerous situations for diminishing fear, for convincing themselves of their own social value and for mitigating the inferiority complex; b) the *insecure type* is characterized by a need for the presence of a higher authority that will take care of them, that will provide security for them, that will value the good and will punish the bad, that is the perfect representation of "good parents"; c) the *realistic type* is characterized by the desire of acquiring knowledge as a mark of true power, that generates self-safety; and by the ability to take measures when self-security is under threat. Since 2007, some research has been done in Romania focusing on the features of self-safety of different types of children.

2. Research investigation

Experts in the field of education have confirmed the impact that teachers have on their pupils' lives as role models and as keepers of pupils' secrets. The situation has raised the following question: how can teachers' communication styles influence their pupils' self-safety during the learning process?

To answer this question, we performed psychological research aiming at revealing the influence of the teacher's communication style on the way preadolescents manifest their self-safety during the learning process; the wider goal was to design strategies that will improve pupils' school performance and will reduce failure in school.

Our research focused on two major objectives: investigation of the teachers' communication style and investigation of the preadolescents' type of self-safety during the learning process. We started from the following hypothesis: taking into consideration preadolescents' features, we assume that we will find different types of influence of the teachers' communication style upon the pupils' self-safety manifested in the learning process.

Our research included an initial testing procedure on 30 preadolescents and 20 teachers. The obtained Cronbach Alpha index ($\alpha = .602$) allowed us to proceed to extended psychological research that had the following stages: a) investigation of the teachers' communication styles; b) investigation of pupils' types of self-safety manifested in the learning process.

We performed our research on 240 preadolescents coming from the urban environment, with subjects aged 11-14, 108 boys and 132 girls, (from five schools in Bucharest) and on their 80 teachers aged 21-60, 52 women and 48 men, who teach the following subjects: Romanian language and communication, mathematics, science, foreign languages. The schools were selected according to the following criteria: a) each school provided educational services to 2500 families; b) each school have enrolled over 100 students in gymnasium and had a staff of at least 50 teachers. (Figures 1 and 2).

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