The meaning of teacher's unconditional positive regard towards students in educational contexts

Agnieszka Swarra, Monika Mokosińska, Artur Sawicki, Michalina Sęktas

University of Gdańsk

17. The meaning of teacher's unconditional positive regard towards students in educational contexts

Agnieszka Swarra, Monika Mokosińska, Artur Sawicki, Michalina Sęktas

Instytut Psychologii, Uniwersytet Gdański
Opiekun naukowy: dr Paweł Atroszko

Agnieszka Swarra: agnieszka.swarra@gmail.com

The aim of this article is to describe teachers' attitudes which might influence the development of students' potential in a positive and negative way as well. On the basis of previous research and humanistic psychology theories, it has been assumed that the therapist's features which positively influence the client's well-being can be reflected in the teacher-student relation. According to Carl Rogers, creating relation and unconditional positive regard are the key components of positive change and development of an individual. Unconditional positive regard means accepting the human being's worth, his experience and various features of his character without any expectations towards the individual (Rogers 1957). The following conditions which are mentioned by Rogers are empathy, thanks to which the teacher understands his student and coungruence which makes the educator a person who is consistent and able to express his inner feelings. What is more, according to the Self-Determination Theory, people experience the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. As Edward Deci and Richard Ryan claim, after fulfilling the needs mentioned above, the level of individuals' potential and intrinsic motivation increases (Ryan & Deci 1985). In educational contexts, teachers who respect these needs contribute to the development of their students (Deci & Ryan 2016).

Negative attitudes and value systems which impede or even make it impossible to achieve unconditional positive regard, are also going to be discussed. First of them is narcissism which is manifested by arrogance, low empathy, and exploitativeness towards others (Morf & Rhodewalt 2001). Second one is cynical hostility which is characterized mostly by mistrustfulness and negative beliefs about human nature, followed by low social support (Kaplan et al. 2004).

The overview of teachers' attitudes which affect the students poses an important reference point in transforming the educational system in a way that will create the greatest environment for students to fulfill their potential and experience well-being.

1. Introduction

School has always played a detrimental role in the process of intellectual and emotional development of an individual. Despite being perceived as an institution that is created to pass on some fundamental facts concerning basic fields of knowledge, its main function is to prepare young people to understand reality, to find their place in it, and to live independently (Korzeniowski 1991, p. 39). Providing their offspring with high-quality education is understood as a good start and absolutely imperative for some parents. Sending their child to a particular school can be understood as placing parents' trust in this institution. Such kind of confidence might not only mean believing in substantial knowledge of teachers, but also in their educational and problem-solving skills. What is more, a research on randomized sample of teachers show that fifty three percent of them perceive their profession as having more social responsibility than other occupations in which people help others (Putkiewicz et al. 1999). Individual differences in students' needs include organization of learning, optimal learning techniques, time of internalizing knowledge, optimal latitude in learning, and creativity. Modern programmes of teachers' development do not seem to work as the research show that the higher teacher's qualifications, the higher tendency to work with gifted students he shows. Unfortunately, it does not solve the problem of the students with learning difficulties (Charles 2006). Educators are obliged to solve these problems in addition to pass substantial knowledge to their students. Their formal education and training courses finished after getting a degree are often insufficient in dealing with these kind of conflicts as they also have to provide the students with

educational care and help them to enter the fast-moving world of constant changes (Brzezińska 2008). In this article, the authors focus on personality traits, values and beliefs that influence the relation between teachers and their students. That kind of relation is reviewed as similar to client-therapist relation described by psychologists, where a therapist (or a teacher) act as a person having skills and scientific knowledge about helping people in critical moments of their lives. School period is long enough for students to experience such kind of difficulties. Then, the teacher has the chance to observe his students in their natural environment. Deriving knowledge from the science of psychological therapy my bring new solutions to many problems in education system. This article focuses on answering the question how to get the best out of student and experience satisfaction, on the basis of knowledge and acceptance.

School is an environment created for learning, teaching and educating young learners to the future social and professional life. An integral part of school is school climate: group phenomenon shaped by four dimensions (created on the ground of recent research) : safety (physical and social emotional), teaching and learning (leadership is involved), relationships (respect for diversity, school community and collaboration, morale and connectedness) and environmental structural (understood as cleanliness, aesthetic quality and size of school, obligatory and facultative offerings) (McCabe et al. 2009). Former research showed the importance of a school climate in an educational process. For example, positive perception of school affects the student's self-concept , decreases absenteeism and predicts rate of student's suspension (McCabe et al. 2009). Safe, supportive and responsive school environment is shaped by intragroup relations and creates commitment to school which ensures the optimal foundation for social, emotional and academic learning (McCabe et al. 2009). In addition, commitment to school and positive feedback from teachers influences the student's self-esteem (McCabe et al. 2009).

2. Positive psychology in education

As far as the school environment is concerned, teachers are people who are supposed to create the best conditions which will enable their students to learn and develop their personal resources. To achieve this, educators should introduce certain attitudes towards their students which will make them realize their full potential. According to the humanistic psychology which emphasizes the positive human potential, it is essential to create a specific kind of approach towards individuals to help them to grow. In order to achieve the client's well-being, there are a few conditions that must be met. Carl Rogers claims that, among others, the relationship between a client and his therapist as well as unconditional positive regard are the essence of the positive change in person-centered therapy. The relationship creates the basic contact upon which individuals start to develop their personalities whereas unconditional positive regard (UPR) means accepting the person's experience and all the features of his character without any expectations (Rogers 1957). In fact, a positive association between unconditional positive regard and therapeutic outcome has been found and UPR turned out to be an essential factor for introducing other interventions (Farber & Doolin 2011). The concept of unconditional positive regard has also been used in child-centered play therapy (CCPT), which has been based upon the principles of Rogers' philosophy of people's constant will to develop themselves and ability to self-direct and then, introduced into working with children (Axline 1947; Landreth 1993). The unconditional positive regard separates the children's behaviour from the inseparable value they have. This kind of attitude leaves the room for the child's misbehaviours or failures and makes them feel sure that the relationship will not end or the adult will not start to show them disrespect if they make any mistakes (Landreth 1991). The same kind of approach might be introduced between the students and their teacher. Accepting the students and not rejecting them, despite their flaws or misbehaviours will make them feel secure and respected in any circumstances.

The next factor which is essential to create the individual's growth is empathy which is an emotional and at the same time cognitive understanding of another person's experience and internal states (Tengland 2001). In therapeutic context, a positive association between the therapist's empathy and therapeutic outcome has been found (Elliot et al. 2011). When it comes to field of education, teachers' empathy also has significant influence on learners' development and well-being. According

to Bridget Cooper, there are key types of empathy in teaching/learning relationships. First of them is functional empathy which is connected with the whole class relationships and group empathy. This kind of empathy means the system of codes, manners and empathic structures which help the teacher to maintain the whole class and try to pay attention to everyone. The next type is fundamental empathy which means the basic contact upon which the teacher start to create the primary relationship with the student and includes behaviours such as giving attention, expressing enthusiasm or accepting the learner. The fundamental empathy also consists of ways of expressing like body language, tone of voice or words used to describe one's thoughts. In time, this primary type of empathy might change into profound empathy. The latter stands for deeper awareness of what happens in particular child's inner world. What is more, it is connected with constructs like the teacher's self-knowledge, the willingness to meet the child's need and the sense of happiness. Moreover, truly empathetic educators do not separate cognition from feelings. As students develop both personally and academically, the teacher who is compassionate and shows empathy in their relationship, really enables them to grow as they feel cared for and safe. In fact, empathy is crucial in the process of high quality learning (Cooper 2002). This concept might be also supported by research conducted by Aspy in which six hundred teachers have been trained in empathetic behaviours and then the educators worked with ten thousand students. The outcomes of the teachers' attitudes throughout the school year have been measured and they have been compared with the control group. It turned out that the students of empathetic educators got better results in reading, writing, expressed less problems with absence and were more spontaneous at the same time (Aspy et al. 2001).

The last factor which is based upon the client-centered theory is congruence which means congruity between the therapist's internal awareness of his own emotions and external expression of them. A positive association between therapist's congruence and therapeutic outcome has been found (Kolden et al. 2011). According to Howard Seeman, in educational contexts, a congruent teacher is a person who shows the students who he or she really is whereas the learners perceive their educator as present and therefore they feel attached to him. This kind of attitude fosters their relationship and makes the pupils believe their tutor (Seeman 1999). All things considered, it is essential to introduce the three teacher's attitudes towards their students mentioned above in order to promote the learners' well-being. Unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence might be perceived as individual concepts, but there are also authors who claim that these factors should be regarded as one meta-condition (Mearns & Cooper 2005), which means that all of them are crucial in the process of personal growth.

3. Self-determination theory

The next theory according to which mental health and intrinsic motivation is achieved by satisfying three psychological needs is Self - Determination Theory which has been established by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan in 1985. The authors claim that in order to experience prosperity and high level of intrinsic motivation in one's life, the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be fulfilled. Intrinsic motivation is a concept which occurs when no external factors are present and the activity is enjoyable without any additional reward. Certain behaviours derive from the person's own desire and are reinforced by internal excitement and curiosity (Deci & Ryan 1985). It has been found that intrinsic motivation was related to students' well-being (Burton et al. 2006). The sense of autonomy, which is the first of three needs that enable intrinsic motivation, means having the choice and control over one's own life and making decisions based on one's own will (Deci & Ryan 2000). In educational contexts, it has been found that supporting the student's autonomy leads to increased level of their intrinsic motivation (Reeve & Jang 2006). Moreover, in many other studies, it was positively associated with other positive outcomes like increasing learners' self-esteem (Deci et al. 1981). Supporting the learner's autonomy means fostering their values, needs and interests. It also stands for creating lesson plans together with students and incorporating their visions into the learning process. What is more, it means that educators give their learners time to deal with their tasks in their own way and engage them in explaining various problems which can give them the chance to pay attention to seemingly uninteresting problems (Reeve 2006; Reeve et al. 2004).

On the whole, tutors who want to support the students' autonomy should create conditions in which the learners' inner resources are incorporated into school activities (Reeve & Jang 2006).

The second of the student's needs which should be satisfied during the learning process is the sense of competence which is the feeling of effectiveness of one's actions (Harter 1978). Learners who feel competent know that they will manage their compulsory education and all the difficulties connected with it. Therefore, educators should provide their learners with tasks which are challenging and possible to solve at the same time. This kind of approach gives students opportunities to expand their knowledge and feel that they can cope with their assignments (Niemiec & Ryan 2009). It has been found that supporting the student's sense of competence leads to increased level of intrinsic motivation (Boggiano & Ruble 1979; Deci 1971) but it turned out that without the feeling of autonomy, the sense of competence is not sufficient enough to maintain the learner's internal motivation to studying (Deci et al. 1999).

The last need which ought to be fulfilled to achieve intrinsic motivation is sense of relatedness which is the sense of belonging, affection and security within relationship (Edge & Skinner 2002). In educational contexts, when the sense of relatedness is present, the students feel that they are respected and liked by the teacher. Such learners involve in the process of learning more often than those who feel disliked by their educator. What is more, individuals are more likely to perceive ideas and values of those they are attached to as their own (Niemiec & Ryan 2009). Therefore, it has been found that there is a positive association between students' internal motivation and sense of relatedness (Furrer & Skinner 2003). In different research, elementary school students were reported to be engaged in the learning process and have efficient coping strategies in school situations when they experience the sense of relatedness (Ryan et al. 1994). Adding to this, it has been found that teenagers put more effort in their schoolwork and achieve better results when the quality of their relationship with the teacher is high (Birch & Ladd 1997). To sum up, satisfying all of these three needs mentioned in Self-Determination Theory is crucial to help the students in developing their full potential.

4. Negative predictors of positive relation between teachers and students

There are many personality traits and beliefs that can hinder that kind of positive relation between student and the teacher and it is very important to identify them early among teachers as well among students. In this article we will shortly describe just two of them: narcissism, and cynical hostility. Choice of these ones is not random – both of them are incredibly important and popular. Both can be understood as a result of changes of western culture, and both are ways to separate one's life from the different problems of the world and others with concentrating on self-interests only. Narcissism is a wide concept, used both to describe a particular set of traits among general population (*grandiose narcissism*), and to describe a pathology, closer to a clinical term of narcissistic personality disorder (*vulnerable narcissism*). In this article we refer only to *grandiose narcissism*. Morf, Horvath, and Torchetti (2011, p. 399) maintained that narcissism is characterized by "grandiose self-views and a relentless addiction-like striving to continually assert their self-worth and superiority.". Core motives of narcissists include grandiosity, esteem, entitlement, and power. Studies show some relations between narcissism and needs described in self-determination theory, showing that narcissists are often extrinsic motivated, and rate extrinsic aspirations such as wealth, fame, and image (Kasser & Ryan 1996). One of the basic characteristics of a narcissist is lack of empathy (e.g. Watson & Morris 1991), however that conclusions are only true for emotional empathy, not the cognitive empathy. Newer research also show that it is not true that narcissists' low empathy reflects inability, implying potential for intervention. (Hepper et al. 2014). Another aspect that may have an influence on teaching and classroom management strategies is a tendency to devaluate other people in order to maintain high self-esteem. It is quite unlikely that narcissistic teacher would create safe, unjudgemental atmosphere in a classroom – more probably it would be even more competitive, focused on results, and critical. Cynical hostility is also related to devaluating others, but in order to protect oneself from ubiquitous dangers and deceits from other people. The core belief of cynical hostility is cynicism – a conviction that people are in general not trustworthy, and ill-motivated. That

leads to generalized mistrust and hostile attributional style (Smith et al. 2004). That kind of beliefs can, most of all, hinder realising the need of relatedness in schools, and lower social support (which is crucial both for teachers and students). Creating unconditional acceptance conditions require not only basic trust in others, but also constructive ways to deal with stressful situations. Previous research (Sendal et al. 2016) showed dysfunctional coping styles among students, especially lack of searching for both instrumental and emotional support from other people. That kind of beliefs is destructive in a relation, no matter if the teacher is cynical or the student is cynical. Similar to narcissists, cynical people seek for power and achievement (Sęktas et al. 2016). Possessing or lacking power fundamentally transforms how an individual construes and approaches the world. For example – Galinsky and colleagues (2006) found that high-power individuals were less likely to adopt another's visual perspective and were less accurate in judging others' emotions.

5. Conclusions

Fulfilling the basic needs of students may be difficult concerning individual differences and life situations of every student. Apart from creating more trainings for teachers it is important to elaborate *benevolent curiosity* among teachers. It is an attitude characteristic for psychotherapy, where the therapist (teacher) is compassionately interested in the client's (student's) life situation, thoughts and values. That notwithstanding, we are also aware that this kind of changes in education system would be more burdensome for teachers, and that is one of the reasons why we suggest that teachers' resources (both psychological and material) should be increased. Teacher's job is already encumbered with paper work after hours, excessively numerous classes, inadequate salaries, disciplinary problems, noise, lack of support from parents and school administration. All of these factors cause that being a teacher is a stressful occupation and highly vulnerable to burnout. In effect this syndrome reveals consequences in all spheres of the individual's life: physical, psychological and behavioral (Russell et al. 1987). Nonetheless, recent studies showed that prevention of teachers' burnout is possible. Teachers who receive support from principals and are treated like colleagues by them are less vulnerable to a burnout (Dworkin 1985). Furthermore, supportive supervisions and positive feedback concerning teacher's skills and abilities from others reduce possibility of occurrence of this negative syndrome (Russell et al. 1987). As mentioned earlier, numerous obligations and inadequate salary are components of a burnout. In consequence, competent teachers are increasingly changing their occupation into other less encumbered (Cunningham 1982). Raising salary would cause retention of this phenomena and increase job satisfaction. Educators whose needs are fulfilled, will be able to concentrate more on the things which are essential in their students' process of growth. Therefore, there is still a lot to be done in terms of studying the causes of certain teachers' attitudes. In order to recognize the conditions which make the teacher more congruent, empathetic and, what is the most important, able to show unconditional positive regard towards his students, further research must be conducted. Moreover, it is crucial to find out what the causes of the teacher's willingness to foster the students' need for autonomy, competence and relatedness are. Knowing all of these things, it will be possible to create a truly developing and nurturing environment for today's students.

6. Literature

Brzezińska AI (2009) Nauczyciel jako organizator społecznego środowiska uczenia się. Forum Dydaktyczne: 5-6.

Clotfelter CT, Helen F. Ladd HF, et al. (2006) Teacher-Student Matching and the Assessment of Teacher Effectiveness. The Journal of Human Resources 41(4): 778-820.

Cooper B (2004) Empathy, interaction and caring: Teachers' roles in a constrained environment. Pastoral Care in Education, 22(3): 12-21.

Cunningham, WG (1982) Teacher burnout: Stylish fad or profound problem. Planning and Changing 12: 219-244.

Deci EL, Ryan RM (2000) The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry 11: 227-268.

Dworkin AG (1985) When Teachers Give Up: Teacher Burnout, Teacher Turnover and Their Impact on Children.

Furrer C, Skinner EA (2003) Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. Journal of Educational Psychology 95: 148-162.

Galinsky AD, Magee JC, Inesi ME, et al. (2006) Power and perspectives not taken. Psychological science 17(12): 1068-1074.

Hepper EG, Hart CM, Sedikides C (2014) Moving Narcissus. Can Narcissists Be Empathic?. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 40(9): 1079-1091.

Jang H, Reese J (2006) What Teachers Say and Do to Support Students' Autonomy During a Learning Activity. Journal of Educational Psychology 98(1): 209 –218.

Kasser T, Ryan RM (1996) Further examining the American dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Personality and social psychology bulletin 22(3): 280-287.

Jayne KM (2013) Congruence, Unconditional Positive Regard, and Empathic Understanding in Child-Centered Play Therapy. Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of North Texas.

Konarzewski K (1991) Sztuka nauczania: podręcznik dla studentów kierunków nauczycielskich. Szkoła. PWN.

McCabe J, Michelli L, Pickeral T, et al. (2009) School climate: Research, policy, practice, and teacher education. Teachers college record 111(1): 180-213.

Morf CC, Horvath S, Torchetti L (2011) Narcissistic self-enhancement: Tales of (successful?) self-portrayal. in: Alicke MD, Sedikides C (eds.) Handbook of self-enhancement and self-protection 399–424.

Putkiewicz E, Siellawa-Kolbowska KE, Wiłkomirska A, et al. (1999) Nauczyciele wobec reformy edukacji. Żak, Warszaw

Rogers, CR (1957) The Necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. Journal of Consulting Psychology 21(2): 95-103.

Russell DW, Altmaier E, Van Velzen D (1987) Job-related stress, social support, and burnout among classroom teachers. Journal of applied psychology 72(2): 269.

Sendal L, Krzyżaniak P, Raczyńska A, et al. (2016). The mediating effect of coping strategies on cynical hostility and perceived stress – preliminary findings. in: Leśny J, Nyćkowiak J (eds) Badania i Rozwój Młodych Naukowców w Polsce. Nauki humanistyczne i społeczne 83-91.

Sęktas M, Sawicki A, Pianka L, et al. (2016) Relationship between cynical hostility and values from educational perspective - preliminary research. in: Leśny J, Nyćkowiak J (eds) Badania i Rozwój Młodych Naukowców w Polsce. Nauki humanistyczne i społeczne 98-104.

Smith TW, Glazer K, Ruiz JM, et al. (2004) Hostility, anger, aggressiveness, and coronary heart disease: An interpersonal perspective on personality, emotion, and health. Journal of personality 72(6): 1217-1270.

Watson PJ, Morris, RJ (1991) Narcissism, empathy and social desirability. Personality and Individual Differences 12(6): 575-579.