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27–29 November 2014
Skopje

Faculty of Philosophy
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IMPROVING THE MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Abstract

The most significant segment of life in a multicultural and multi-religious society is an advanced form of instruction in the classroom. In fact, the classroom is a micro level reflection of society as it is the place in which the understanding and acceptance of cultural and religion differences and the mutual respect among the members of different communities are the very foundations for building models of behaviour. With this realization on mind, the accent of the paper is placed upon the realization of a successful communication between the teacher and the students and the creation of a favourable socio-emotional atmosphere in the classroom, both based on respect, appreciation, understanding, and cooperation as important prerequisites for promoting multiculturalism in one of the earliest settings of multicultural community – the classroom. The attention in the paper is drawn upon the capability of the teacher to be empathetic with the students, and his/her skills to make students enjoy the atmosphere, to satisfy their need for distinguishing themselves, to enable them have the same opportunities for their accomplishments, to satisfy their need for acceptance and recognition within the classroom, to provide each with a place and position within the classroom, to enable them develop self-confidence, etc. In line with that, our paper provides various techniques with specific activities which largely improve the atmosphere in class towards acceptance of

differences via equal and unbiased interactive communication between the students and the teacher, as well as between the students themselves.

Keywords: *multicultural, environment, successful communication, teacher.*

Introduction

A very important task set before the teacher in a multicultural classroom is to establish good communication with the students (see Int'l Journal of Arts & Sciences, 2011: 437). It is the quality of classroom communication development that the quality of the relationship teacher-students and students-students, and the social and emotional atmosphere in the classroom will greatly depend upon. Good relationships between members of the class community are the basis for a pleasant atmosphere as it provides students with the ability to satisfy their needs for distinguishing themselves, for success, acceptance and recognition in the group, their need for self-confidence development and performance appraisal, and above all it provides the opportunity for improvement of the multicultural and multi-religion differences between the students from different ethical, religious and social class environment. In that sense, the objective of this paper is to present the appropriate methods and techniques that stimulate and improve the socio-emotional atmosphere in the classroom, the interaction teacher-student and the collaborative

atmosphere as the building foundations of multicultural cooperation, tolerance, respect and mutual acceptance in the Republic of Macedonia. The analysis and practical examples for implementation of the techniques and strategies we offer have proceeded from the years of our work experiences at the Faculty of Education in Bitola, i.e. from the professional and practical training of future teachers in subject teaching, and from the experiences we had when working on various projects and other forms of professional development.

Assumptions for successful communication in the class

One of the many tasks set before teachers is establishing good communication with students, the quality of which largely influences not only the further course of the relationship between the teacher and the student and among students themselves, but the social and emotional atmosphere in the classroom as well, and in the school in general. Communication with the students is a very complex domain because the school itself is an open social institution in which the teacher does not only communicate knowledge, but he/she also coaches, educates, encourages students, and above all he/she has to cope with social problems and relationships among students, the solution and improvement of which highly depend on the teacher's communication development skills.

Therefore, it is necessary to fulfil certain assumptions, which will lead to a desirable and successful communication among all of the members of the classroom community.

Furthermore, bearing in mind that we refer to the development of students of the first and of the beginning of the second cycle of elementary education, whose reactions – as a result of the nature of their development, are still largely dependent on the teacher's behaviour and instructions as he/she is the key person in the creation of the desirable interactive-communicational and socio-emotional ambience with his/her skills for solutions relying upon didactics and teaching methods when teaching.

In that sense, the first assumption for establishing and maintaining successful communication in the classroom is teacher's empathetic approach (Int'l Journal of Arts & Sciences, 2011: 438 – 439) towards the students, as well as towards the situations that he/she teaches about. Actually, it is necessary that the empathy is a feature of the teacher's character and personality, and that he/she develops it with his students since they are at the age when they are apt to self-identification. Thus an empathetic teacher will be a suitable model for their self-identification. But why is it important that the teacher is empathetic and that he/she cherishes an empathetic approach when teaching? The truth is that the teacher who is empathetic has a greater opportunity to discover the hidden motives of a student's behaviour and thus have a better understanding of the student and his/her behaviour. The teacher's skill to exercise empathy is particularly called for in the student – teacher communication; in order to bring his/her communication into accordance with students' abilities and capacity for

understanding, it is necessary that he/she communicates with them empathetically. On the other hand, an empathetic teacher spurs empathy with students by encouraging them continually to talk about their feelings, to reveal their wishes, motives, and what is especially important, an empathetic teacher listens to the students and provides them with pleasant and safe surrounding and atmosphere for work in class. The insights of researches in this area led to conclusion that in schools in which students are engaged in activities, which develop and promote empathy, the overall success is much better. Techniques with concrete activities through which the empathetic teacher will help students to better understand their own feelings, and thus to be able better to understand the feelings of others, are varied.

1. A very suitable technique to develop empathy in students is "role playing". (see Bratanić, 1993: 103) Role-playing in multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious environment enables students to become more sensitive to the feelings of others, to improve their understanding of the relationship between the individuals and their group, to develop group cohesion etc. The empathy development via role-playing can be achieved by means of assigning the students with an authentic or fictional problem context. For example, role-playing can serve in real or fictional situations that treat honour, self-acceptance, refusal, acceptance of the differences, friendship, responsibility, cooperation, equality, obligations, duty, respect, etc.

Among the activities by which the empathetic abilities of students are developed via role playing, the following ones can be mentioned:

- The teacher hands out the cards to the members of the group. On each card there is a textual scenario of a cultural or confessional situation with all the necessary information given, (for example, marking an occasion with customs, tradition, celebration, folk-dances, etc.). The student plays the role specified in the scenario and then the emotional elements associated with the authentic situations in practice are discussed;
- The use of the technique again: this technique allows students to make corrections to certain mistakes they made the first time they were role-playing. For illustration, a wedding celebration of various ethnical and confessional communities can be analysed, and the respective customs can be acted as well as other segments of tradition such as folk dances and folk music performance or any other aspect of traditional celebration. Then, the emotions prevailing in the celebration are analysed, the family atmosphere is described, the presence of relatives and friends as well. Then, the aspects of celebration characteristic for the other community scenarios are discussed which could be preceded with an analysis of a textual wedding ceremony discourse. When the word again is uttered students are to act again but different roles this time in accordance with the respective wedding celebration. It is in this way that sensitivity is developed for the different but authentic approach that various religious and ethnic communities have when marking an occasion and celebrating with the family;
- The teacher can give a description of a character and ask the students to play the role of the character as realistically as he/she can. The student should develop the imagination and identify himself/herself with the character, that is, respond from the character's perspective;
- The teacher can ask students to walk around the classroom without making up crowds or elbowing. The teacher names a feeling and a student's task is to make a halt and show to the class how he/she moves around when, for example, he/she is happy, both with gestures and facial expression. Then, the teacher names another feeling and the steps are repeated. The activity goes on. Finally, the teacher may ask the students to write a reflexive essay so that they can think about what makes them happy, sad, angry, etc. and then to share their views with the other students in class. In this way, students' feeling of togetherness will be greatly enhanced through their own realization of the unique but universal way of any human's reaction, regardless of the cultural, ethnical community or confessional group he/she belongs to.

Among the activities to develop and promote empathy, the following ones should also be mentioned:

- Teacher presents students with a particular emotional situation, which should arouse empathy with them; students may be asked to work in pairs and give a careful look to a picture, which portrays sad and depressed faces of children of different races and social backgrounds. Then the teacher asks the students to talk about the feelings they have when watching the picture. The activity ends with the students' assignment to write a reflexive essay;
- The teacher may ask the students to read a sad story in class. When they read the text he/she the students are expected to talk about their feelings; the activity ends by their writing a reflexive essay. In this way, as in the previous case, students are trained to develop their imagination about others' standpoints;
- Within the teaching contents of a particular subject, the teacher can select scenarios from the TV series, movies, and documentaries, etc., that is scenes that show, for instance, a conflict among different ethnic communities. Then, the teacher asks the students to discuss the specific scenes; he/she encourages them to discuss about their experiences and also to hear the experiences of others. In this way the teacher promotes acceptance and respect for the differences among the various ethnic communities, acceptance and respect for their feelings;
- The teacher may ask students to find information about the life and work of distinguished people of a high degree of empathy, such as Mother Teresa, for example. With her picture in front of them, which may be placed on the board, students discuss her life and work, emphasizing the aspects in which her empathy is particularly prominent. The activity ends with an assignment from the teacher for the students to write a reflexive essay;
- The teacher may ask students to develop skills for active listening as it helps them develop empathy. Active listening involves listening to others in order to understand what he/she is saying (agreeing with the attitude of the other is not relevant), to understand what he feels and to understand what the other wants to achieve. For this purpose, one of the students working in pair asks questions and the other one responds. The following questions are some of those, which can develop empathy: What is it that you really want? How do you feel? Do you need any help? The one who asks should express his/her willingness to help. Then, a brief report is given in front of the whole group. The teacher may ask the pairs of students to change their roles. Our experience shows that active listening does not have the

attention it deserves. Most often students do not listen actively and carefully, but while one student is speaking the others usually do not listen to him/her, but try to think of their own response;

- The teacher can write a topic on the board: How does empathy allow us to understand others? Then the teacher can ask them to read a corresponding text. He/She can give the students a blank sheet on which they are to draw pictures or maps presenting what empathy means for them. The information from the text helps students to develop relationships through empathy expressed for the content of each other's sketches. Students share their ideas with their partners and discuss similarities and differences in their ideas;
- The teacher may ask the pairs in the cooperative group to discuss the following questions: What makes you happy / sad, angry? How do you respond when you have these feelings? Can you tell me how your parents feel? How can you know? How can you show your friend that you are really listening? How does active listening look like? How do you respond when someone interrupts you? If you find out that your friend received an unsatisfactory grade in the written test in Mathematics what would you say to him/her? What would you do for your friend to feel better? etc. The teacher may ask students to write what an active listening looks like and how it sounds;

- Another technique for stimulating the development of empathy among students may be the so-called two-columned diary. Students work in pairs; each pair is handed out a sheet divided into two columns - the first one featuring a quote or a drawing that stimulates empathy with students, and the second one is empty for the students to fill out with expression depicting their feelings and attitudes. Then a discussion follows.

2. In order to achieve successful communication in class oral or written feedback such as praise, approval, written evaluations, is of a paramount importance. The feedback indicates the interest of the teacher and his/her objective approach towards students and motivates them for continuing their learning, and, to a great extent, it reflects on the relationships among the members of the classroom community. The feedback is necessary as a part of the oral explanation of the achievement of students in their activities performance; it is particularly an inevitable part of a written assessment of the achievements. The impact of the feedback is different on different students, and because of that the teacher has to know the individual characteristics of each student, the familial conditions, and their cultural and religious environment, on the basis of which the communication with the students should be individualized and controlled. Teacher's feedback should be given to each student in continuity.

In the contemporary teaching, the feedback provides an intensive interaction between the teacher and the student. Thus, effective teaching is one in which the teacher has full insight into the quality of the information received, in the effectiveness of its essence processed by the students, and in the possibility of a purposeful utilization of such information when acquiring new knowledge, i.e. the ability to successfully resolve different school and life problems. With the help of the reciprocal feedback, both the teacher and the student direct their action toward a common goal. In the teaching process the feedback should be given on a regular basis, it should be corrective, timely, specific and fully understandable both for the students and for the teacher, because it is via the feedback that the subjects in the communication are kept informed about the work, the correctness of the chosen route and about the correctness of the conduct towards oneself and towards the others.

3. The school climate has a favourable impact on the establishment of successful communication in the classroom. School climate is defined as a tendency to prevalence of certain behaviour. It is the result of the use of certain procedures in communicating with students: application of rewards and penalties, application of cooperation, etc. The climate in the classroom consists of four dimensions: the emotional atmosphere that involves warmth and support, mutual acceptance, empathy in students in class, etc.; social atmosphere that includes supporting and respecting the ideas and opinions, tolerance, equality, rights to

decision-making and initiative-taking, etc., teacher – student interaction upon which the nature of communication depends; and competitive atmosphere or an atmosphere of cooperation. (Andrilović, Čudina, 1985: 133)

The major features of the teacher upon which the climate in the class depends are the following:

- Personality of the teacher – the competency, vocational readiness, developed empathetic ability and knowledge of pedagogical and psychological issues should enable the teacher to choose the most appropriate methods of work, to promote collaborative work by affirming human relationships and respect for students' personality, as well as to provide their personality self-realization, etc. First of all, the personality of the teacher should be marked by the following features: reliability, openness and honesty, tolerance, inclination to justice, etc.;
- His/Her knowledge about which behaviour gives good educational outcomes and his/her skills and knowledge to achieve optimal educational outcomes;
- His/Her personal philosophy about the educational goals that he/she wants to achieve with his/her work.
- Emotional atmosphere. The creation of a positive psychological atmosphere in the classroom is one of the important conditions and criteria for successful

communication between the teacher and the student. It has already been confirmed that the good relations in the classroom depend on the abilities of the teacher to establish a good relationship with students and accept them emotionally, as well as to understand their needs and problems. The good emotional climate in the classroom and in the school depends on the nature of the relationships between the students as well. Acceptance of the students on the part of the teachers is important, but not sufficient for their adjustment in school. Students also need acceptance by their peers. Studies show that self-acceptance and acceptance by others are closely linked. The personal qualities of the teacher, his/her patterns of behaviour and values, and his temper, to a large extent determine the quality of the experience that students acquire in the classroom. (Ђорђевић, 2004: 81)

- Social atmosphere. The social atmosphere in the class is created by the general atmosphere that prevails in the school and depends on the way the whole organization works and on the way teachers communicate with each other. It should be borne in mind that the climate in the classroom and communication that takes place in the same are the most important factor in the socialization of the students in the school. It should be emphasized that the good atmosphere in the classroom is the result of conscious efforts on the part of the teacher and the students. Research

indicates that teacher behaviour reflects the behaviour of the members of the class. For example, the dominant behaviour of the teacher is discerned with the members of the class as well.

The established social relationships, teacher – student, lecturer – auditorium, teacher – group, teacher – teaching tools – student, indicate the nature of communication and interaction between the teacher and students in class. On the other hand, the successfulness of the communication will depend on the knowledge of these relationships. (Int’l Journal of Arts & Sciences, 2011: 446)

The successfulness of the communication, which is the basis of the relationships among all of the students in the educational process, greatly depends upon the above stated factors. These are the activities that schools ought to continually perform: promotion and betterment of the communication between all segments involved, promotion of the multicultural environment as one that is not a communicational barrier but a setting to bring differences of the world into harmony that is to be cherished.

Conclusion

The understanding of cultural values in the global setting is a significant tool for communication development by which potential barriers between different cultures are overcome, an atmosphere of mutual confidence is established, and students are engaged in joint activities. Regardless of our perspective that we

do understand each other, communication is a complex process that requires to be frequently exercised in order to promote the multiculturalism. The promotion of multiculturalism entails active and empathetic listening, to oneself in someone else's shoes, to respect each other's differences and choices, to overcome prejudice. A multicultural classroom has to be grounded upon these differences and to use them as the foundation for progress and growth. Teachers who emphasize these differences in their classrooms are successful in multicultural setting development, which would promote the achievement of the educational goals of all of the students. A successful multicultural classroom requires that the teacher is open with his/her students and knows all of the aspects of their everyday life and activities, particularly the learning patterns of those coming from different cultures. In this sense, the above stated points suggest a conclusion that the promotion of a multicultural setting yields more harmony in the society and in the world, it enhances the perception of equal value of all human beings. On the other side, it is necessary for students to become familiar with the tradition, values, and norms of the various ethnic groups, and thus cultivate the respect for diversity, which would eventually lead to a higher tolerance among members of multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious community.

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