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Can the teacher's personality influence development of identity in pupils?

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Introduction

Civic education, by which is meant teaching and learning about identity and citizenship, is necessarily concerned with values. Values are qualities which influence how a person makes a decision how to act, and how a person evaluates events (Kluckhohn, 1951). But how is it possible to learn values from teaching? How can the children in primary school be taught abstract values such as equality, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation and respect for differences? It is the development of these values that is proposed as an important general goal of education in the Slovenian *School Legislation* (Ministry for Education, 1996).

Teachers of young children have a very complex role. In preparing teachers to develop learning about identity and citizenship, we must bear in mind that students are affected not only by the method of teaching but also by the teacher's personality. The teacher as a personality is as equally important as the curriculum. Personality is reflected all dimensions of human behaviour and activity, including values. Cattell's studies found that behaviour is a function of circumstances and those structural personality traits that are relatively stable (Musek, 1993), so that it is possible to an extent to predict a person's behaviour in a specific situation, knowing his or her profile of personality traits.

The understanding that every child must be accepted as an individual in school should not remain simply on the declarative level, but should also be a reflection of reality. Experiences of acceptance facilitate learning opportunities in school and are thus very important in a person's development. If the child feels that he or she is respected, he or she endeavours to learn better and establishes better relations with his or her peers. School and friendships are so important that, as Stassen (1994) wrote, failure in school and rejection by peers can seem crushing events. They can leave painful memories, and long-term feelings of inadequacy, incompetence and inferiority. This research examines at how the influence and personality of the teacher could develop children's values and achieve social relationships in a class in which no child was isolated.

Objective

Teachers in elementary school stay with the same pupils for all the time in the year, and thus for most of the child's daily working hours. The influence of this teacher on the as yet not fully formed personality of the pupil is very important. The development of personality depends, to a great measure, on the quality of their social interactions with others, so that every child must experience acceptance in the school setting in order to develop fully. This present study aimed to find the connection between teachers' relatively stable structural personality traits (Musek, 1993) and a pleasant, creative working classroom atmosphere, as defined by a range of indicators. We were also able to detect a pleasant atmosphere indirectly, by the absence of isolated children.

Hypothesis

We supposed that the status of isolation shown by some students might change during the school year. In classes being taught by teachers who showed with certain personality traits judged to be important for dealing with children, we hypothesised that there would be fewer isolated children at the end of the school year than there were when the year began.

Method

Participants

541 pupils from first to fourth grade of primary school participated in the study. They came from schools in different locations (city school, city suburb school and country school), and from twenty-one classes. All of the students from these classes participated, as did all of the teachers (twenty-one class teachers).

Materials

To assess the teacher's personality, form B of the Cattell questionnaire for sixteen personality factors (*16 PF*) was used, adapted for the Slovenian cultural background. This questionnaire is one of the best-known personality tests, and is particularly appropriate for establishing the profile of personal factors of an adult. *16 PF* is suitable for our use because it is integrated in the theory of the structure of primary and secondary personality factors (Cattell, 1986). *16 PF* has also been verified in many countries around the world.

To determine the number of isolated students, we used a sociometric technique developed by Moreno (1962) for detecting the status of an individual's position in a group. We used a simple version in which each student records the names of the three class members whom they would like to be with in school. Such data allows the construction of a sociometric table or sociogram – a graphic presentation of a pupil's social position in class.

Procedure

This sociometric procedure was carried out separately in each class, at the beginning and at the end of the school year, to discover the different numbers of socially isolated pupils in each class with a particular teacher over the year.

The teachers were asked to circle one of three possible answers to each of 186 items in their questionnaire. These items were grouped into 16 primary factors, which represented basic personality traits.

Results and discussion

Personality traits of the teacher – change of sociometric status of isolation of the teacher's pupils

To establish whether there is a relationship between the variables described above, we correlated the scores of primary factors from the teachers' responses to *16 PF* with differences in the number of isolated pupils at the beginning and at the end of the school year in each class.

Table 1 Primary factors and correlation coefficients (r) higher than $\pm .30$

Factor	Low meaning	Coefficient	High meaning
A	Autonomous, reserved	.33	Participating, warm
B	Concrete thinking		Conceptual thinking
C	Affected by feelings	-.31	Calm, unruffled
E	Considerate, humble		Assertive, competitive
F	Reflective, serious		Talkative, impulsive
G	Changeable, expedient		Persistent, conforming
H	Cautious, shy	.35	Socially bold
I	Tough minded		Tender minded, sensitive
L	Accepting, trusting		Mistrusting, oppositional
M	Conventional, practical	.35	Imaginative
N	Forthright, unpretentious	-.31	Sophisticated, shrewd
O	Confident, self assured		Apprehensive, concerned
Q1	Conservative, traditional	.40	Experimenting, liberal
Q2	Group oriented		Self sufficient
Q3	Lax, uncontrolled		Disciplined, compulsive
Q4	Composed, relaxed		Tense, driven

We will consider here only those teachers' personality traits that correlate sufficiently highly – positively or negatively – with the change in the number of isolated pupils during the school year. The correlation coefficient over the limit of $t \pm .30$ were considered to be significant. These coefficients are not low, since many other factors are also involved in the acceptance or isolation of a particular student within a group of schoolmates. Six of the primary factors can be seen as related to the dependant variable (the difference in the number of isolated pupils). In discussion they are ranked according to the size of the correlation coefficient without regard to a positive or negative sign.

Experimenting-liberal (Factor Q1)

Persons with a high score on this factor are liberal, radical in their opinions, tolerant of others, free-minded, receptive to progress and changes. They do not like to moralise and they are sceptical about dogmatic truth. It is therefore not surprising that such teachers can accept differences between children and be tolerant of all. This behavior may bring about a decrease in the prejudices some children may have toward others. On the other hand, conservative and traditionally oriented teachers are not very open to change and difference. Some studies show that teachers who cannot accept more demanding children (many of whom come from more democratic families, have better access to information, do not respect authority of the teacher simply because of their professional status, and do less conscious of the limits of acceptable behavior) are greatly stressed: this does not seem conducive to creating a pleasant atmosphere in class.

Imaginative (Factor M)

Persons with a high score on this factor have powerful imagination. They are creative and unconventional; their actions come from intrinsic motivations. Creative teachers can find many ways to organise classwork so that each child feels accepted. This may also explain a positive correlation between such a teacher's personality trait and the change of social isolation for some pupils. Torrance (1981) and Pergar (1994) confirm that pupils

in classes with more creative teachers attained significantly higher average scores on their creativity tests, and that such teachers have a pleasant atmosphere in their classes.

Socially bold (Factor H)

This dimension of personality is more hereditary than others, and is a primary trait that is a component of extrovert personality. Socially bold persons are active and friendly. Their behaviour is spontaneous. They do not show fear or distrust. We can predict that such teachers know how to motivate more cautious and shy pupils to cooperate with others.

Participating-warm (Factor A)

A warm, communicative, affectionate, kind-hearted and gentle teacher is more attentive and empathetic to the troubles of isolated pupils than a reserved, cautious and critical teacher who probably does not much care that some children have problems joining in with a group of schoolmates.

Affected by feelings (Factor C)

This personal trait indicates the level of control of emotions. A person with a weak ego is more impulsive, more affected by feelings and less stable. Cattell's research (Musek, 1993) of the personality profile for different professions established that teachers have weaker egos than pilots, doctors, nurses and people from professions where decision-making is an important part of the job. Since emotional stability is influenced by the environment, it is suggested that teachers may develop this trait during their work with children. There is a negative correlation between a teacher's emotional stability and the change of social status of isolation in some pupils. It may be good that some of the conflicts between children – for example, those caused by their prejudices and differences (poverty, different ethnic group, hyperactivity, learning difficulties, obesity etc. of some isolated schoolmates) do not leave the teachers calm and unruffled.

Forthright-unpretentious (Factor N)

It seems reasonable to believe that forthrightness, unpretentiousness and spontaneity of the teacher help to create a friendly atmosphere where children's needs are met.

Conclusion

The results of this questionnaire on teacher's personality traits, usually manifest as characteristic behaviour toward other people and interpersonal relations, suggest there are that on average fewer isolated pupils in classes with teachers who are imaginative, socially bold, participating and warm, affected by feelings and unpretentious. Some of these traits are more environmentally influenced, so they may be developed (at least to some extent) through special training. Teachers should know that their sensitivity to the child's psychological need to belong and to be competent is, to a great measure, a reflection of how much the child likes attending school and the pleasure and satisfaction they experience there. Awareness that this is a professional responsibility should be a starting point for developing skills in teaching, especially for teaching how to live in a society in which tolerance and solidarity are respected.

It would be good if more teachers believed that – as Lewis (1995) reported a Japanese elementary teacher saying – a teacher's job is also to create happy memories.

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