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Drama as active-social learning in the School Club: impact on changes in social preferences in the class

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Present status of the subject

In the current Slovak pedagogical context personalistic concepts of education are favoured in the theoretical field. In specifying the optimum social and emotional educational environment, a personalistic education paradigm, among other things, accentuates the level of social relationships in the educational process. However, the reality of educational practice remains orientated towards cognitive theories of education.

As shown in experimental research (Lašek, 1994; Portík, 2001), good social relationships in the classroom boost the quality of student's performance in class, so factors which influence social preference in the classroom need to be identified. Kožnar (1990, 1994), Reichelová and Baranová (1994), Bratská (1992) and others maintain that in order to enhance the quality of the social group, learning through personal experience is necessary. Learning which utilises simulation and experimentation with various forms of social behaviour is termed *active social learning* in the literature, and its main goal (based on the participant's personal experience in the simulated situation) is in

- optimising interpersonal perception,
- raising social sensitivity,
- developing the skills necessary for solving interpersonal conflicts.

Role-play as a method of affecting the socialisation and personalisation of an individual is used in various contexts: psychological training, personal and social education, psychodrama and drama in education. Many authors list role-play among the forms of active social learning. Experimental researchers (Taras *et al*, 1988; Matson *et al*, 1988; Hepler, 1991; Matousek *et al*, 1992; Kožnar and Hapalová, 1994) have demonstrated the high level of efficiency of drama in developing pro-social behaviour in children.

Drama exists as a specific educational concept that exploits theatrical elements and processes. We define drama in education as a system of social and artistic learning. Its goals comprise

- personality development,
- pro-social behaviour development,
- artistic development.

The lack of exact scientific data regarding the efficiency of drama in students' personality development was a significant stimulus in launching our own research, which was aimed at finding the efficiency of drama in enhancing interpersonal relations within the classroom.

Our research was carried out from 1998 to 2001. It focused on the analysis of the possible influence drama might have on the improvement of social relations during the educational

process. We hypothesised a correlation between the introduction of drama into the children's school club activities and the quality of social relationships within the class.

Research problem, research tasks and hypotheses

Problem:

In which direction might the introduction of drama into the children's school club activities influence the social choices in the group?

The research tasks:

- a. design projects for experimental intervention with role-play and improvisation as a dominant method;
- b. carry out the intervention with an experimental group, achieved through the educational activities of the children's school club (an out-of school institution).
- c. analyse input and output data obtained in social preferences measurement within the group.

The problem and tasks constituted part of a more complex longitudinal experiment, the aim of which was to observe and evaluate changes in the social climate in the experimental and test groups over a period of three years. The research presented in this paper can be characterised as the evaluation research of the group or a quasi-experiment. The relations were formulated into a hypothesis: if drama in the children's school club is utilised, differences in the input and output values of the individual indexes of social preferences in the group are expected.

The hypothesis examines the relation of the following variables:

Independent variable - the introduction of drama

In the course of the implementation of the first projects, this included the use of activities which focused on the discovery of the self and the surrounding world, contact, fluency of speech, extra-lingual communication and group feeling, and so on. In the experimental group, drama was included in the schedule of extra curricular activities in the children's school club once a week (two hours per session) during one school year. We selected the content of the drama sessions from games and exercises from drama methodology aimed at children's social and personality development. During the drama sessions we adopted a mono-thematic approach. At a later stage, extended exercises were carried out using dramatic structures - projects with a 'conflict'. The methods of exploring moral dilemmas (Vacek, 2000) through improvisation and role-play were utilised: fairy-tales, literature and real life issues inspired structured dramatic games. Overall we carried out 34 two-hour experimental projects (68 academic hours).

Dependent variable – the structure of social preference in the group

This is represented by: individual indexes of social preference of an individual

- ISSP - index of the positive sociometric status (attractions) of an individual,
- ISSN - index of the negative sociometric status (repulsions) of an individual,
- ISSM - index of the mixed sociometric status of an individual.

Research methodology

Social preference measurement was conducted in the experimental group (prior to the experimental intervention and afterwards) by the use of a sociometric test. In parametric sociometric testing the number of choices is limited. In our case, the students were asked to record two positive and one negative choices.

The collected sociometric data was later transferred into:

1. a sociometric matrix,
2. a sociogram (graphic representation)

These were then subjected to quantitative index analysis.

Research sample

The experimental group (in which the changes of social preference were studied) consisted of 15 pupils in the 3rd class of elementary school who attended the children's school club in the 1998-99 school year.

Analysis and comparison of the input and output data from the experimental group

Structure of the sociometric matrix

The matrix revealed

- the structure of social preference within the group;
- the position of particular individuals within the group.

The matrix served as the prerequisite for subsequent evaluation processes (graphical as well as quantitative).

Quantitative analysis of social preference indexes

The structure of social preference was defined by individual indexes of social preference. We focused on the following:

- any shift in the sociometric (individual preference) status during the input and output sociometric tests,
- the number of dyadic relations – reciprocal, mutual social preference in the experimental group (EG) in the input and output sociometric tests.

Changes in input-output values of the individual indexes of social preference

The analysis of the sociometric indexes helped us to:

- assess the status structure of mutual personal relationships;
- compare the changes in the sociometric status of individuals between the input (IST) and output (OST) tests. Sociometric status is characterised by the degree of emotional preference of an individual in relation to other members of the group. A higher preference score of a particular member of the group indicates an increase in his/her sociometric status.

The terminology denoting the sociometric status levels in sociometric literature is not consistent. We have used the terminology of Volkov (1980), who presents a classification of group members in connection to the level of achieved social status from 'Stars', through 'Preferred', 'Accepted', and 'Not-accepted' to, finally, 'Rejected'. Kirichuck (1980) equates Volkov's classification of sociometric status levels with the figures of mixed sociometric status (ISSM). The values indicate quantitatively the position of an individual in the web of social relations as follows:

Sociometric status	Value of the mixed sociometric status (ISSM)
1. 'Stars'	+ 0.20 and higher
2. Preferred	+ 0.05 to + 0.19
3. Accepted	- 0.04 to + 0.04
4. Not-accepted	- 0.05 to - 0.19
5. Rejected	- 0.20 and lower

After analysing both the pre- and post-experimental intervention individual status structure of the experimental group, we came to the following conclusions on the basis of the analysis of individual social preference indexes:

Table 1 Status structure in the input and output sociometric tests

Sociometric status	Input	Output
Stars	4	3
Preferred	6	6
Accepted	1	5
Not-Accepted	2	0
Rejected	2	1

After the experimental intervention, the aim of which was to augment the personal and social education of the children in the group through drama methods, some changes occurred in the status structure of the group (Table 1):

Input sociometric test results (IST) – four stars, six preferred students and one accepted student as opposed to two students rejected and two non-accepted: alternatively this can be seen as eleven students with positive status as opposed to four whose status position was negative.

Output sociometric test results (OST) – 14 students with a positive status as opposed to one with a negative status position.

Why did this change in the dyadic relations and the sociometric structure of the experimental group occur? According to Petrusek (1969), previous research on sociometric hierarchies of group members have demonstrated that an individual's sociometric status is closely related to his specific capabilities and individual performance. It is evident that a traditional school with a cognitive performance orientation provides more opportunities for success for individuals with a dominant left-brain hemisphere who excel at logical reasoning, mathematics and language intelligence. Creative students with artistic inclinations and musical intelligence have fewer chances for the development and expression of their skills. It may be that those students who

appear less skilful in the traditional school record more frequent negative sociometric positions (due to their poorer individual performance). It may be also that relationships between the junior grade pupils in the elementary school are more affected by their hobbies, gender or possessions than by their school performance. However, our research was carried out in a class at an elite language school, with a performance-oriented curriculum and a high level of in-class competitiveness. The assessment of school performance was thus a very significant factor in determining a student's status.

The criterion for choice in the input sociometric test concerned group work during school tasks. The members of the experimental group apparently expected the performance- (cognitive-) oriented task they were accustomed to, and this expectation conditioned their sociometric preferences. On the other hand (according to Petrusek, 1969) in the 'leisure time' groups, there is a positive correlation between sociometric status and proficiency in the preferred leisure activity.

Our project enabled all the participants to perceive their schoolmates in a different light. Those students whose in-class performance was not excellent became equal or even key organisers and participants in the drama games and projects. They excelled due to their original ideas and creativity in movement. In the reflexive and evaluation parts of the projects they often enjoyed the admiration of others. We believe that the opportunity to demonstrate skills, individual capabilities and the space for asserting the authenticity of their personality may have determined the shift from a negative sociometric position to a positive for such students.

If we are correct then the process of education should respect the following:

- pupils' skills in the area of perception as well as information processing
- the dominance of a certain area of intelligence.

The educator should be encouraged to design the educational process so as to provide an opportunity for all pupils to succeed. This approach would be reflected subsequently in increased acceptance, which ultimately optimises interpersonal relations in the classroom and creates conditions for a favourable social climate: this in turn impacts positively on the efficiency of education.

Reciprocity of choices

The position of an individual in the group is not determined solely by his/her status, but rather by the mutuality and symmetry of relations with the other group members. According to Kolominskij (1980), the structure of mutual personal relations contains two principal variables: the sociometric status of the individual, and the indicator of reciprocity of his relations (mutual preference in sociometric choice). The mutuality of positive preferences can be analysed from two perspectives:

1. The individual aspect, characterised by the presence or absence of mutuality. Mutuality is represented by:
 - the number of reciprocal choices,
 - the persistence of the mutuality.
2. The group aspect, expressed as the total number of mutualities in a given group. This is one of the most important parameters used for assessing interpersonal relations.

Mutuality as a personal indicator has an important role in the creation of an individual's emotional self-confidence within a group. As shown in the research (Kolominský, 1980), respondents from all age groups prefer mutuality to status to a distinctly larger degree. When we analysed the input and output data from sociograms, the following difference in the number of mutual choices was recorded:

- Input sociometric test: number of mutual choices = five
- Output sociometric test: number of mutual choices = ten.

The increase in the number of mutual choices in the group is evidence of the improved quality of the relationships among the group members. Why did this occur? Hare (1962) and Newcomb (1965) present four groups of factors that influence the formation of friendly relations:

- spatial proximity,
- similar individual characteristics,
- shared interests and value orientation,
- similarity of personality traits.

The doubling of mutual choices and social preference structure in the experimental group can be explained by the use of Homans' assumption (in Petrusek, 1969): the number and regularity of interactive acts positively affects the formation of social and emotional relations. According to the research of Samuhelová (in Gavora, 1988), Gavora (1988) and others, traditional education prefers Student {S} \leftrightarrow Teacher {T} and T \leftrightarrow S interaction. Such interaction is thought to condition the difference in a pupil's communication status. The rare occurrence of different interactions patterns such as Student \leftrightarrow Student; Student \leftrightarrow Students reduces the number of possible interactions among the students. This is reflected in a near absence of social and emotional relations among students in the classroom. In our experimental project with the children's school club, we chose cooperative approaches which provided methods of getting to know each other, and respected the dynamism of the group etc. Participants noted that they were given the opportunity to get to know each other in a different light; something that their classroom practice had not provided for them thus far.

In our opinion, these facts contributed to the modification of their mutual relations. Changes took place in the proportion of interactions, all to the benefit of engaging more students in the participation represented in the more frequent S \leftrightarrow SS, S \leftrightarrow S interaction pattern. According to Byrne and Snyder (1969, p.207) cooperation is an important means for changing social and emotional relations. Cooperation, as well as spatial proximity, influences the formation of friendly bonds. Meetings in the children's school club, common work and participation in projects have contributed to positive changes of the status positions within the group.

Conclusion

The degree to which we know other people increases with a growth in the number of interactive acts. The cooperative approach discussed above, together with the space for mutual communication, informal divisions into groups and changes in group composition (often systematically thought out) have contributed to the students' better knowledge of

each other. The utilisation of interactive approaches in which one reflects his/her feelings in drama accentuated friendly relationships. This finding corresponds with the research of Block and Benett (1969), who proved that perception of others differs between friendly contacts and more formal work contacts (or in the case of our research, within the framework of the school classroom). These interpretations provide evidence in favour of cooperative and experience-oriented pedagogical strategies which facilitate the social education of children and bring quality to the level of peer contacts; effects that determine the future level of social success in this area.

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