Teacher-Pupil Interaction: Factors Strengthening and Impairing Adolescent’s Self-esteem

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Abstract

Self-esteem is considered to be one of the most essential personality constructs, which does not lose its relevance through the period of human existence. According to the psychologists, self-esteem remains as an important criteria of person’s significance through various age groups, as well as while the goals of human life, achievements and needs are changing. Scholars, who study the construct of self-esteem, notice the tendency of self-esteem decrease during the period of adolescence, if comparing to other age groups. The majority of psychological researches, that reveal structural components of self-esteem construct as well as determinants of adolescence high self-esteem, usually distinguish the significance of family, interpersonal relationships with peers, academic achievements, learning environment and social skills.

Keywords: teacher-pupil interaction, adolescence, high self-esteem, low self-esteem.

1. Introduction

Scientists Amundson (1991), Petty (2006), Harter (1993), McLaughlin (1997) and others, who examined the educational teacher-pupil interaction, emphasize direct relation between teacher’s personal qualities, his/her moral values and pupil’s self-esteem (self)development. McLaughlin (1997) draws attention towards the inevitability of values’ education in the learning process and highlights the role of teacher’s personality. According to the scholar,
each statement of a teacher, each pedagogical activity or abstention from the activity is based on values. Teachers cannot avoid values while trying to act in “neutral” or “non-judgemental” way, each aspect of the school includes assumption of value and directly or indirectly conveys the value-based “message”. The author justifies neutral position of the teacher only when argumentative issues occur, or when huge variety of rounded approaches exist and there is no explicit or single solution, that could be reasonably transferred to pupils. In this case, pupils have the privilege to make independent decisions that are not influenced by the position of a teacher. In this way teacher encourages pupil’s autonomy, independence, responsibility as a development of education values.

The new learning conception primarily marks a change in teacher and pupil roles. Petty (2006), claims, that the responsibility of learning has to be transferred to pupils, teacher also has to encourage them to rely on their abilities. According to the scientist, the greater responsibility can be achieved together while planning learning activities, collaborating, evaluating academic achievements and progress. Such partnership activity between teachers and pupils while providing learning objectives, together creating learning environments, evaluating and self-evaluating achievements enables equal relationship, empowers pupil to rely on his/her abilities and set goals independently. In modern school teacher becomes class manager, who plans, commands, coordinates teaching/learning of pupils, at the same time paying a lot of attention towards direct communication and collaboration with pupils and establishment of coherent intercommunion.

According to Juul (2012), in the educational activity the process of communication becomes more important than the content of communication. Author claims, that the dialogue is the essence of communication, where the attention is paid not to who is communicating, but how, and where the authentic intercommunion is important when communicating with other individual. Rogers (1993) also claims that authenticity is the significant component of communication, since authenticity refers to the naturalness and sincerity of intercommunion. Author also adds that success of the conversation depends on the authenticity of the contact contracted, because the authenticity of the speaker increases the authenticity of the listener. In the process of communication it is important to accept pupil as a person (like you), but not as an object (like this). Unconditional acceptance and respect based dialogue between teacher and pupil enable pupil to experience his/her own value, also to be heard and understood. In this way pupil can reveal his/her experiences, feelings, contact the teacher and accept his/her assistance without tension or anxiety. Scientific analysis revealed, than constructive teacher-pupil interaction, based on unconditional respect, confidence and kindness is a significant factor while strengthening adolescents’ self-esteem and motivating to seek for academic progress.

2. Purpose and research methods

By implementing a qualitative research it was aimed to find out adolescents’ opinion and to identify what personal qualities and moral values of a teacher strengthen adolescent’s self-esteem. 136 Lithuanian comprehensive school’s 7-9 grade pupils participated in the qualitative research. Questions of qualitative research were composed in order to better understand the phenomenon under research, to reveal individual pupils’ interpretative experience-based explanation occurring from the situation analysis. Adolescents were asked to remember and describe the situation when they were feeling respected, significant, appreciated and vice versa.

3. Findings and results

While analysing self-esteem strengthening related situations it was identified that 49.7% of adolescents feel significant, appreciated and respected when positive teacher’s attitude towards pupils exist. Thepositiveness of a teachers is expressed by praises (19.8%), respect of pupil’s opinion and attitude (11%), also acceptance and appreciation of pupil’s abilities. 25.7% of pupils indicated that academic achievements (i.e. good evaluations, positive evaluations of tests and “difficult subjects”) strengthen their self-esteem. Pupils also mentioned not only the significance of good evaluations but also positive and public teacher’s comments. It is obvious, that positive relationship with peers is also significant for adolescents’ self-esteem. 11.7% of pupils indicated that being the member of a team or a leader (5.1%) allows them to feel significant and appreciated. Interestingly, that positive attitude of peers compared with positive attitude of teacher towards pupil (49.7%) comprises only 16.8%, i.e. it has a lower impact on adolescents’ self-esteem. The difference of data obtained can be explained by the fact that teacher’s
formal and informal evaluations, attitude and feedback towards the pupil are extremely significant for a pupil himself, because these factors have a significant impact of the formation of peers’ attitude and intercommunion.

Table 1. Factors Strengthening and Impairing Adolescent’s Self-esteem.

| Factors strengthening adolescents’ self-esteem (%) | Factors impairing adolescents’ self-esteem (%) |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Academic and other achievements                   | 41.1                                          |
| Positive relationship with peers                  | 16.8                                          |
| Positive teacher’s attitude towards pupil         | 49.7                                          |
|                                                  | Academic failures, low progressiveness         |
|                                                  | 6.6                                           |
|                                                  | Negative relationship with peers              |
|                                                  | 28.5                                          |
|                                                  | Negative teacher’s attitude towards pupil     |
|                                                  | 32.8                                          |

While examining the research data related to situations impairing adolescents’ self-esteem it was identified that 32.8% of pupils indicated that due to negative teacher’s attitude they feel unappreciated, humiliated and unregarded. Negative teacher’s attitude manifests through unappreciation of depreciation of pupil’s efforts, disregard of pupils opinion, disrespect, negative comments and replication. Attention should be paid towards pupils’ emphasise on teacher’s public comments concerned with pupil’s failures and actions and towards castigation, disparagement of a pupil in front of the class.

Although, while implementing the research pupils were not asked about persons related to strengthening or impairing of their self-esteem, however, while describing these situations adolescents mentioned persons affecting their self-esteem. Describing self-esteem strengthening situations pupils mentioned teachers (45%), peers (38%), family members (13%) and managers, coaches (4%). Therefore by indicating teachers, as persons closely related to self-esteem strengthening situations, pupils confirmed the significance of teacher’s personality in the process of pupil’s self-assessment. Self-esteem impairing situations were related with teachers (26%), parents (9%) and peers (65%). Adolescents indicated the following peers’ actions offending their self-esteem: mockery, humiliation, gossip, rumours and ignoring. After the assessment of teacher’s personality influence on pupils’ intercommunion, it can be stated that one of the most significant functions of a teacher is class management, also control and regulation of situations offending pupil’s self-esteem and dignity.

Adolescents were also asked about what behaviour of a teacher strengthens and what impairs their self-esteem. Therefore the following teacher’s behaviour aspects that strengthen pupil’s self-esteem can be distinguished (Table 2) respect to a pupil, tolerance and goodwill, support, encouragement, confidence, objectivity, impartiality.

Table 2. Personal qualities and moral values of a teacher strengthening adolescent’s self-esteem.

| Category                        | Subcategory                        | (%) |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|
| Respect (46.1)                  | Tactful and polite communication   | 14  |
|                                 | with pupils                        |     |
|                                 | Being interested in pupil, attention towards pupil | 13.9 |
|                                 | Polite communication with pupils   | 7.3 |
|                                 | Equivalent, partnership communication | 7.3 |
|                                 | Address pupil by a name           | 3.6 |
| Tolerance, goodwill (14.6)     | Tolerance towards pupil’s opinion, approach | 7.3 |
|                                 | Comprehension                      | 5.1 |
|                                 | Goodwill                           | 2.2 |
| Support, encouragement, assistance (24.9) | Support and assistance for a pupil | 8.8 |
| Confidence, belief in pupil (8.7) | Compliment, support                | 16.1 |
|                                 | Trust in pupil, confidence        | 3.6 |
|                                 | Belief in pupil, his/her future perspectives | 5.1 |
| Objectivity, impartiality (6.6) | Objectivity, impartiality          | 6.6 |

Almost half of pupils (46.1%) responded, that teachers could express their respect by respectful behaviour, which is understood as tactful, polite, attentive and equivalent communication. Table shows that 24.9% of pupils assume that teachers’ support, encouragement and assistance strengthen their self-esteem.

According to Barkauskaite (2001) no communication can be achieved or be successful without advance confidence. Pupils’ responses indicate, that they feel significant and important when teachers trust them (8.7%). Establishment of the environment of mutual trust is significant, because teachers’ trust in pupil provides more independence and responsibility while imposing various tasks and obligations. Myers (2008) claims that trust in pupil and expectations especially encourage those pupils who are straggling or lagging, to whom positive teachers’
attitude has a significant impact.

Pupils indicate teachers’ objectivity and ability of being impartial (6.6%) as characteristics strengthening their self-esteem. According to pupils’ responses it can be stated that it is important to feel positively and equally evaluated and accepted, your efforts to learn are noticed and appreciated without a prejudice.

Results of implemented research indicated, that one of the most significant reasons of teachers’ and pupils’ misunderstandings, conflicts and learning failures is unequal and imperative communication and dominating disrespect towards pupils’ personality. For the establishment of equal and partnership relationship, the opinion of Barkauskaite (2001) that everyone can be a teacher or a pupil at the particular point is relevant. This is based on the assumption that everyone has a particular knowledge and everyone needs to learn. <…> When education is based on the interaction between the superior one (the teacher) and the inferior one (the pupil), questions related to control inevitably occur, i.e. can pupil be trusted to implement what is best if their teachers will not control them? The answer depends on the assessment of human nature, if it is treated as trustworthy, the control role will be diminished Equivalent teacher-pupil relationship implies a refusal of prescriptive moralizing-officious and commanding tone, the key of equivalent relationship becomes reflexive self-regulation, which motivates to be responsible for the consequences.

Pupils also mentioned the significance of teacher’s expectations in the self-esteem strengthening process. Myers, Willse, Villalba (2011) researched the significance of expectations of social environment and identified that teacher’s attitude towards pupil correlates with pupil’s learning results: “teachers are of high opinion about successful pupils”. This is mainly because “teachers know what their pupils are capable of and how they learn”. Scientific studies Petty (2006) shown that higher expectations of a teacher encourage the straggling or lagging ones, to whom positive teachers’ attitude has a huge impact. Teacher’s expectations affect pupil’s achievements in the direction set by a teacher. What is more, according to the studies implemented it can be stated that less time and assistance is provided for pupils who are self-conscious, they also get less attention, less compliments from a teacher and they are often criticized.

Adolescents’ responses related with teacher’s behaviour that impairs their self-esteem were grouped according to teacher’s personal qualities and moral values that have the greatest impact: disrespect, intolerance, constant criticism, ignoring, no-confidence, unfairness, partiality. It was identified that the ultimate negative impact on adolescent’s self-esteem has teacher’s disrespect (74.1%), criticism and ignoring (74.1%), disbelief in pupil, unfairness (5.8%), no-confidence (11.4%), intolerance (66.3%).

| Table 3. Personal qualities and moral values of a teacher impairing adolescent’s self-esteem |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Category                                     | Subcategory                  | (%) |
| Disrespect (74.1)                            | Disrespectful behaviour, offences, malice, cynicism | 43.5 |
|                                               | Non-communication, failure to agree | 9.5 |
|                                               | Autocratic, categorical behaviour | 7 |
|                                               | Familiarity                   | 4.7 |
|                                               | Arrogance, egocentricity, conceit | 4.7 |
|                                               | Being strict on other, but not on oneself | 4.7 |
| Intolerance (28.5)                           | Intolerance and ignoring of pupil’s opinion | 28.5 |
| Criticism, ignoring (52.2)                   | Constant criticism, emphasis on misbehaviour | 38 |
|                                               | Malice, hostility             | 9.5 |
|                                               | Apathy, ignoring              | 4.7 |
| No-confidence (11.4 )                        | No-confidence, disbelief in pupil | 11.4 |
| Unfairness, partiality (66.3 )               | Teacher’s “Omniscient Syndrome” | 26 |
|                                               | Intercomparison of pupils     | 24.9 |
|                                               | Acceptance and hostility towards particular pupils | 15.4 |

While indicating the examples of teacher’s behaviour impairing the self-esteem, pupils emphasize public humiliation and offence. 12.5% of pupils treat teacher’s disrespectful behavior as a factor impairing their self-esteem. Such responses emphasize the demand of self-control and self-possession as one of the most significant features of professional teacher. Teacher’s self-control is also important for the educational effect on pupils during complicated and problematic situations. In professional activity of a teacher it is important to follow the discipline of
emotions, i.e. emotional neutrality or positiveness and strictly prohibited negativity. 6.6% of pupils believe that the experience of teacher’s derision, mockery or irony impairs their self-esteem: “hidden mockery (irony) in teachers words, when these words are applied to you, no one mentions your name, but everyone knows it”, “malicious mockery”, “derision”. Such behaviour of a teacher is particularly harmful, because it strengthens and legalizes the phenomenon of bullying in the classroom.

Adolescents’ self-esteem is impaired when they are compared with peers emphasising weaknesses. 2.9% of pupils stated that such actions as “showing that I am inferior in comparison to others”, “comparison with a tablemate”, “comparison with other pupils” and alike offends their self-esteem. Modern teaching/learning concept emphasizes the avoidance to compare pupils’ achievements with each other, teaching/learning results as well as pupil’s behavior should be compared with his/her previous achievements. Teacher’s ability to understand and to go deep into their different attitude, interests, and the way of thinking is especially important to adolescents. 2.9% of pupils state that teacher’s inability and reluctance to understand, tolerate, accept different appearance or different way of thinking impairs their self-esteem. Educationalists and psychologists, who have studied the period of adolescence, state that adolescents’ reaction towards evaluations, criticism is extremely sensitive, the experience of failures is painful, and therefore they often see only disadvantages in themselves. It is obvious that adolescent, who experiences constant criticism and disregard from the teacher will feel worthless, his/her self-confidence and self-esteem will decrease. 30.7% of pupils stated that teacher’s criticism and disregard reduce their self-esteem.

Undoubtedly, teachers should talk with pupils about under-achievement or incorrect behaviour, but during the conversation it is important to encourage pupils to believe that failures are surmountable. Trust in pupil, optimistic attitude towards his/her abilities is necessary. It is not recommended to diminish pupil’s achievements and opportunities. 5.8% of pupils indicated, that they experience teachers’ no-confidence, disbelief in their abilities and possibilities. 5.8% of pupils stated that teacher’s unfair assessment and behavior impair their self-esteem. In order to avoid partiality in the assessment process it is extremely significant to introduce pupils with the assessment criteria, and be able to reason the equity of decisions and assessments.

4. Conclusions

Implemented research revealed that for pupils, opinion and evaluation expressed by teachers are as much important as opinion and evaluation expressed by peers. Positive and public attention, assessment, encouragement from a teacher is extremely significant for adolescents. In cases of criticism, negative feedbacks and comments pupils emphasised teacher’s confidentiality and individual consulting. Research results allow the suggestion that for adolescent’s self-esteem the educational teacher-pupil interaction and relationship with peers are significant, more often teachers are participants in the situations that strengthen adolescents’ self-esteem, and peers vice versa, they are participants in the situations that impair adolescents’ self-esteem. Inferior physical experience and academic achievements are significant for adolescents’ self-esteem only when they become the reason of negative relationships with other pupils and teachers.

Scientific literary analysis and pupils’ responses allow the conclusion that teacher’s personality and competences are the priorities in the process of learning, but not teaching methods. In their responses teachers stated that the efficiency of teaching/learning methods and means depends on teacher’s and pupil’s roles and teaching activity manner. Modern teaching process is characterized by means of direct effect, e.g. attention and assistance for pupil, initiative encouragement and support. Scientific literary analysis and research implemented confirm that academic activity gets the maximum attention, and based on academic activity pupils’ personality is being identified.

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