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The development of peer relations in students

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The development of peer relations is an important aspect of students' social growth and maturation. When these relations develop normally there is no need for intervention from adults. Unfortunately it is not infrequently that the development of peer relations deviates from the norm due to children's personality factors or to mistakes in the child rearing practices of the family or school. Intervention, when needed, requires from educators a good knowledge of the major factors influencing the development of capabilities for interpersonal relations, the ability to identify abnormalities in this development, and knowledge of effective strategies for correcting the situation. This paper describes briefly how peer relations develop and discusses some intervention programs which can be used when abnormalities appear in this development.

Development of social competence in children

Many psychologists have emphasised repeatedly that perceptual and cognitive processes mediate social behaviour by influencing the child's interpretation of social cues. The interpretative power of individuals depends on their emotional as well their cognitive experiences and capabilities. However, even where there is a high level of cognitive development, the emotions experienced in early social interactions with other people play the most critical role in a person's readiness for further social contacts. This is well supported by Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial crises, which claims that failure to solve initial emotional conflicts like 'global trust' versus 'mistrust' (at approximately one year of age) hampers the positive solution of all following emotional conflicts, such as 'autonomy' versus 'shame and doubt'; 'initiative' versus 'guilt'; and 'industry' versus 'inferiority'. The accumulated unconscious mistrust of other people and lack of self-confidence interferes with the normal development of social skills in youngsters and climaxes in adolescence, when serious difficulties with identity formation appear.

As the most critical period in student social and emotional development is early childhood, it is obvious that in cases of social underdevelopment and emotional maladjustment the student's early experience of family education should be taken into consideration.

Parenting influences

Research findings on the impact of parenting on children's social development are frequently described on two major scales of parental behaviour, represented by 'love versus hostility' and 'restriction versus permissiveness' (Good and Brophy, 1995). The love–hostility dimension is most closely related to a child's self-esteem and orientation to others. The restriction–permissiveness dimension is more closely associated with the development of initiative, autonomy, and conformity. Usually these two dimensions of parenting are not correlated with each other: therefore, four clear-cut parenting styles - combinations of extremist parenting behaviour on both scales - are possible. These different parenting style tends to produce in children quite different attitudinal dispositions and expectations towards other people's behaviour (T. Good and J. Brophy, 1995, pp 92–93):

1. Love combined with permissiveness – high self-esteem and sociability combined with independence and nonconformity. These children are often social leaders or highly creative.
2. Restriction combined with love – conforming and good adjustment to parental demands. Usually these children are overly dependent on their parents, and show lack of creativeness and initiative.
3. Permissiveness combined with hostility – children demonstrate hostility, aggressiveness and paranoia. The consequence of this parenting behaviour is usually low self-esteem in children, often disguised by openly aggressive behaviour.
4. Hostility combined with restriction – low self-esteem, inhibitions, feelings of guilt and inadequacy; general neurotic tendencies.

Educational practice suggests that the first parenting style (love plus a balance between restriction and permissiveness, leaning towards permissiveness) has the highest potential to produce children with a cheerful disposition, friendliness, emotional stability, sincerity and many other personality characteristics which make a student liked by his or her peers. The acquired personality traits have a strong impact on children's interpretations of their social world, enabling them to predict the behaviour of others, control their own behaviour, and regulate social interactions.

The development of these capabilities can be analysed at least in three interrelated aspects if a deeper understanding of the development of friendship patterns in students is needed (Erwin, 1993): (1) empathy and role-taking; (2) understanding of the concepts of friendship - the rules, obligations, and benefits of the relationship; (3) attributions that children make for the causes of social behaviour.

Development of empathetic capabilities

M. Hoffman's (1988) cognitive-affective theory of moral development describes the development of pro-social behaviour in four consecutive stages:
- global empathy
- egocentric empathy (1-3 years)
- empathetic understanding of another's feelings (from early childhood to adolescence)
- taking into consideration another's perspectives and circumstances which require empathy.

These stages of development represent the gradual perfecting of empathetic understanding or role taking – the ability to put oneself in the psychological place of another person. In the normal development of empathetic capabilities, the pattern of children's friendships gradually becomes more selective and other-centred.

Understanding of friendship

Bigelow and La Gaipa (1975) reported on school teachers conducting class exercises in which American, Anglo-Canadian and Scottish children in Grades 1 to 8 (about 6 to 14 years of age) were asked to think about their best friends of the same sex and to write an

essay on what is expected of a best friend that is different from other acquaintances. The content analysis of these essays revealed a sequential invariance of stages in the development of friendship expectations. It was found that eleven categories of friendship expectations appeared at certain age levels and subsequently increased with age in the both samples (Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1975):

Grade at onset	Categories of friendship expectations
2	Common activities and helping (friend as giver)
3	Stimulation value (physical attractiveness, neatness of dress, etc.) and propinquity (living nearby)
4	Character admiration, acceptance, and incremental prior interaction
5	Loyalty and commitment
6	Genuineness (helping friends rather than being helped)
7	Common interests and intimacy potential

The studies uncovered also that expectations at more sophisticated stages do not imply that information that was important at previous stages becomes subsequently unimportant, but is rather superseded by new aspects of expectations.

Attribution theory

Attributions are learned explanations that people give to the causes of their success or failure. It is common for extremely pessimistic and subjective attributions to personality qualities in the case of failure to lead to attitudes of self-blame, while moderately positive attributions lead to increasing self-confidence. In general, studies of children's social relations indicate that popular children interpret another's behaviour differently than unpopular children. Popular children are more accurate in perceiving the effects of their behaviour, and regard their world as more controllable (Erwin, 1993, p 54). Rejected children overestimate their peers' evaluation of their social competence and tend to attribute social failure to personal inadequacy instead of attributing rejection to situational factors or to another child. The attribution of social failure to personal incompetence is associated with a greater deterioration in strategies for initiating relationships in comparison to children attributing rejection to the characteristics of another other child or simply to interpersonal factors such as incompatibility. For example, a study of fourth and fifth grade pupils by Goetz and Dweck (1980) revealed that children of low peer status were more likely to make personal attributions of incompetence as explanations for their rejection, pushing them into a cycle of self-blame leading to feelings of helplessness.

General patterns of friendship during school years

Damon (1977) describes the normal development of student friendship relations in three phases, integrating in his model many research findings.

1. Elementary (up to 7 years) school children's understanding of friendship relations is self-centred and superficial. They play with peers of the same age and sex. Their

friendship relations are overwhelmingly associated with sports activities and entertainment: boys' activities are related to sport and girls' to satisfying their socialising needs. Friends are other children who play with the child, who share their belongings and toys with him or her and who behave nicely.

2. At this level of social development readiness to help a friend or share possessions with him or her becomes a major factor determining the friendship. Though the friends are still mostly playmates, children begin to select friends on the basis of more specific and permanent personality traits. Typical justifications for making friends are 'She always gives me sweets when she buys them'; 'He always protects me when other pupils tease me', etc.

3. The quality of friendship relations reaches its highest level of development in adolescence. Youngsters chose as friends others who shares common interests and values with them, with whom they can discuss their most intimate issues, and on whom they can rely when they are experiencing hardship. At this stage of social development the youngsters' friendship relations become more permanent and they are not frightened by occasional incidents that earlier would lead to the collapse of the friendship relation. At the beginning of adolescence friendship groups are usually formed between young people of the same sex. After puberty the importance of belonging to a peer group gradually declines and adolescents become more independent. Their interest in the opposite sex increases and is evidenced by the formation of couples.

Intervention for improving student social relations

Teacher intervention for improving students' social skills and competence in socialising with peers is needed when conventional education of students and of the class as a social group does not insure the normal social development of all students.

The complexity of social competence as an outcome of education is a real challenge for teachers if intervention is needed. This intervention calls for the creation of conditions that support the 'unlearning' of negative personal attitudinal dispositions and the learning of the positive attitudes and social skills needed for developing relationships with peers. In order to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different intervention programs it is important to comprehend the structure of social competence in the sense of its main components and the learning principles underlying independent as well as interactive development of these components. In this survey of the concepts describing the development of peer relations, I have discussed some affective and cognitive aspects of social competence. A third aspect – mastery of automatic skills and performance patterns – is of minor importance from the point of view of general social development, but plays an enormous role in every incident of social interaction. This aspect pertains to the mastery of single performance skills as well as automatic behavioural patterns. The development of affective, cognitive and performance skills, as components of the social competence, calls for different learning processes and conditions supporting these processes and therefore can be explained and specified in the light of different learning theories.

Behaviourist approaches

Many of the principles of classical and instrumental conditioning are helpful in promoting children's social competence. The principal notion of classical Pavlovian conditioning claims that the repeated coincidence of a neutral stimulus with an unconditioned stimulus, causing basic emotions like fear, leads to the condition where the initial neutral stimulus starts to cause a similar reaction to the unconditioned stimulus. For example, a student being rejected and humiliated by peers when s/he attempts to socialise with them would develop a strong attitude of further avoidance of these contacts in similar situations. Intervention in these cases calls for the removal of this negative association between the cue, represented by a perspective of interacting with a peer group, and the negative emotion. This can be achieved by providing the emotionally harmed student with a positive experience of interacting with peers. Simultaneously, training in the social skills whose lack caused the initial feelings of inferiority is needed.

Training in specific social skills can take a lead in the law of effect underlying instrumental conditioning, which states that behaviour which is followed by a reward or reinforcement is strengthened, and behaviour followed by negative consequences is weakened. The Skinner principle of shaping, based on the theory of reinforcement of positive behaviour, offers many further opportunities for the gradual development of complex behavioural patterns. So by relying on these principles, many of the behavioural patterns needed for contacting peers and socialising with them could be taught in less stressful conditions, with the guidance of a teacher, to the point where the student reaches automatism in their application.

Cognitive approaches

Cognitive theories of learning explain the acquisition of information processing and understanding capabilities. These capabilities are often needed for correcting an initial emotional stimulus that would cause inadequate reactions in interactions with other people. For example, understanding plays a major role in the development of student role-taking abilities from egocentric empathy to taking into consideration another's perspectives.

Decisions to behave in one way or another in social interactions always have moral implications and call for moral judgement and value analysis on the part of the actors. Therefore methods for promoting student moral judgement and value analysis capabilities can be considered as specific approaches to developing student social competences. For example, Kohlberg's (1984) methodology for the development of moral judgement capability is based on the solution of moral dilemmas. Using this method, a teacher may ask a student who has socialising difficulties to analyse the consequences of helping or refusing to help a classmate in trouble. An analysis of the moral implications, which takes place at one stage higher than the actual level of the students' moral reasoning, has proven the most effective (Nucci, 1987).

Another opportunity for developing students' decision-making in social interactions is stimulating them to analyse the values underlying their decisions (see Good & Brophy, 1995).

Neo-behaviourist approaches

These approaches focus on the acquisition of social skills through imitation of models on the grounds that a major part of our social behaviour patterns are learned from single observations of models without any outside reinforcement. Very often a kind of immediate association between the model behaviour and the observer's cognitive-affective condition appears. Later on, when students perceive themselves in a similar cognitive-affective condition, or perceive patterns of behaviour similar to what they observed, these sensory events serve as cues for stimulating a similar reaction. Usually the social learning is spontaneous. However, when learning of certain behavioural patterns is needed, appropriate conditions should be provided. As Bandura (1977) has shown, the acquisition of model behaviours calls for four phases of learning activities: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

Creating favourable peer society

This is the most natural way for promoting the social competence of immature students. However, this approach only works for as long as an isolated or rejected student retains the motivation to practise socialising with peers. Consequently, special conditions should be arranged if the objective is to provide immature students with practice at social interactions that are within their power and that lead them to feelings of adequacy and increasing self-confidence.

At least three types of peer-assisted intervention programs are possible (Erwin, 1993): co-operative learning programs, arranged interactions with peers, and arranged interactions with younger pupils.

Those group work approaches where member students are responsible for the mastery of the lesson by each student in the group, or where the achievement of the lesson objectives depends on the personal contribution of each student, have the highest positive effects on inter-group relations (Slavin, 1994, p 11). Social relations between individual students and student groups can also be improved by making them work jointly on important tasks (Sherif *et al*.,1961).

Arranged interaction with peers and younger students have a special focus on selecting partners for providing socially restrained or rejected students with successful socialising experiences. Erwin's survey of many studies proved that attempts to improve the social standing of isolated children by manipulating their peer interactions do not give lasting effects. For example, partnering a child with low social status with a more popular peer so that others observe their smooth interaction in organised cooperative group activities gives only a temporary effect (Erwin, 1993, p 250). However, partnering socially less competent children with younger children is more effective. For example, in school conditions a socially retarded but academically successful student can be appointed as peer tutor of a younger student. This approach develops the isolated student's single social skills as well as increasing her/his self-confidence in establishing social contacts (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982).

Summary

The approach presented here considers the development of student peer relations as the formation of empathetic and attribution capabilities and the understanding of friendship. Intervention methods for removing deficiencies in the development of social

competences of students based on behaviourist, cognitive and neo-behaviourist principles of learning are especially useful for redressing deficiencies in the specific components of social competence. A controlled environment of social interaction, where socially immature students experience feelings of self-effectiveness in socialising with peers, is more suitable if an integral development of student social capabilities is needed.

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