



The importance of human emotions in the learning context viewed from an ecosystemic perspective

Η σπουδαιότητα των ανθρώπινων συναισθημάτων στο μαθησιακό περιβάλλον μέσα από την οικοσυστημική προσέγγιση

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This paper investigates the importance attributed to emotions by teachers, parents and learners. The study further aims at gauging whether teachers realize how influential their behaviour may be in learner self-esteem. On their part, children testify their own experience with regard to those aspects of teacher behaviour they consider encouraging or debilitating. The inclusion of parents as interviewees was deemed necessary since, according to the ecosystemic approach, they indisputably play a role in supporting a child's education, as this paper's research consolidates. The findings of our research pinpoint that positive emotions are deemed indispensable in a learning environment, with all parties (in their own way each) acknowledging the importance of learners' emotional welfare. The study also reveals the impact of negative emotions on learners and the types of teacher behaviour that are liable for it. Furthermore, associations are made between parent and teacher behaviour, the aim being to find the overlapping areas which have triggered corresponding behaviour patterns by the children.

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Η παρούσα εργασία διερευνά τη σπουδαιότητα που αποδίδουν στα συναισθήματα οι εκπαιδευτικοί, οι γονείς και οι μαθητές. Σκοπό έχει επίσης να εκτιμήσει αν οι εκπαιδευτικοί αντιλαμβάνονται πόσο μπορεί η συμπεριφορά τους να επηρεάσει την αυτοεκτίμηση των μαθητών. Τα παιδιά, από την πλευρά τους, καταθέτουν τη δική τους εμπειρία σχετικά με τις εκφάνσεις εκείνες της συμπεριφοράς των εκπαιδευτικών που θεωρούν ενθαρρυντικές ή αποκαρδιωτικές. Η συμμετοχή των γονέων στις συνεντεύξεις κρίθηκε απαραίτητη καθώς, σύμφωνα με την οικοσυστημική προσέγγιση, ο ρόλος τους είναι αναμφίβολος στην υποστήριξη της εκπαίδευσης του παιδιού, όπως θεμελιώνεται μέσα από την έρευνα της παρούσας εργασίας. Τα ευρήματα της έρευνάς μας καταδεικνύουν ότι τα θετικά συναισθήματα θεωρούνται απολύτως απαραίτητα σε ένα μαθησιακό περιβάλλον, καθώς όλες οι πλευρές (η καθεμία με το δικό της τρόπο) αναγνωρίζουν τη σπουδαιότητα της συναισθηματικής ευημερίας των μαθητών. Η έρευνα αποκαλύπτει ακόμα τον αντίκτυπο

των αρνητικών συναισθημάτων στους μαθητές καθώς και τα είδη της συμπεριφοράς των εκπαιδευτικών που ευθύνονται για αυτό. Επιπλέον, γίνονται συσχετισμοί μεταξύ της συμπεριφοράς των γονέων και των εκπαιδευτικών με στόχο να βρεθούν οι συγκλίνουσες περιοχές που προκαλούν ανάλογα μοτίβα συμπεριφορών από την πλευρά των παιδιών.

Key words: emotions, teacher behaviour, empathy, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, hierarchy of needs, self-actualization, ecosystemic approach, error correction, self-fulfilling prophecy, praise, reinforcement, motivation

1. Introduction

The recent trend in educational practice has placed great emphasis on the humane dimension of education (Μαλικιώση-Λοϊζου, 2001, p.18). The issues that are raised in this context are pertinent to the role of educators and their liability to the development of a healthy and non-threatening learning environment. Despite their significance, research has shown that human emotions are often considered substandard compared to human cognition, thus being emphasised less in educational documents (Allodi, 2010, p.94). Recent language teaching approaches, however, have emphasised the necessity of creating learning situations in which inhibition is lowered and anything that might threaten the 'self' avoided (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p.10). Hence, humanistic theories have currently come to the forefront and redeemed their place in education. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow seem to be in the limelight even though their theories were expressed in the distant past. Concurrently, we will also review the ecosystemic approach, a more recent perspective that emphasizes the importance of the social environment in triggering emotions and behaviour; based on this theoretical background, we will attempt to demonstrate in what ways the ecosystem of teachers, learners and parents interacts.

2. The ecosystemic approach: valuing the individual

The ecosystemic approach has been linked to humanistic theories through Carl Rogers' empathetic understanding. According to Rogers (1967, p.287), significant learning is likely to take place if the teacher accepts the idiosyncrasies and uniqueness of the learners and understands their feelings, as well. Empathetic understanding thus is the key feature that helps teachers to analyze the experience of schooling from a learner's viewpoint (Papatheodorou, 2005, p.87). The notion of an ecosystem in psychology actually focuses on the quality of relationships that constitute the social matrix an individual is part of. Psychologists contend that human behaviour can be interpreted more accurately if considered from a perspective of complex contextual, personal and interpersonal variables (Cameron, 2006, p.293). The focus being on interaction, the ecosystemic approach is valid in our case since the purpose of this research is to delve into the intricate relationships between teachers and learners, and to the role of parents, as well. As constituents of a class system, both teachers and learners are influenced by the relationships shaped in a given classroom setting (Molnar and Lindquist, 1999, p.32); parents, on the other hand, have their own contribution to the system as children tend to be emotionally stable when they are treated in a consistent way by the significant adults in their life (Fontana, 1996a, p.273). Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs could be contemporized to highlight how important

it is to satisfy an individual's basic needs, such as physical comfort, prior to considering psychosocial needs (Gillen et al., 2011, p.75).

Needless to say that catering for the learners' basic needs is the responsibility of the parent and not the teacher; its lack, however, accounts for the learners' failure to meet their psychological needs, which in turn impairs their emotional state. Supposing learners' basic needs are not satisfied, teachers can attempt to bridge the gap between the first two levels of the pyramid by offering learners a positive learning experience. This would be feasible if teachers could reinforce learners' positive emotions and value as human beings (Μαλικιώση-Λοϊζου, 2001, p.72), by forging bonds with them so that the learners verge on self-actualization. Learners need to be revered by teachers as valuable human beings who are struggling to discover themselves and the others.

The ecosystemic approach therefore lends itself to redefining behaviour problems by interpreting a particular situation (Papatheodorou, 2005, p.86). The teacher's role in the ecosystem could be to promote any necessary changes at a systemic level, shifting the balance between the subsystems; namely by attempting to reconstruct the behaviour of all parties in terms that are meaningful to learners, teachers and family members (Cooper and Upton, 1992, p.72). In a similar vein, a change in parents' behaviour may also influence children's reactions, thus reshaping the entire ecosystem.

2.1. Defining some aspects of teacher and parent behaviour

With emphasis placed on empathy and the need for change in perception, the ecosystemic approach endorses a collaborative venture of all stakeholders in order for change in behaviour to occur. We shall first discuss which aspects of teacher behaviour may affect children's behaviour and to what extent. Since the term 'behaviour' is by definition inclusive, it will be narrowed to cover areas such as *politeness, praise and reinforcement, error correction* and *teacher perceptions about learner potential*. Concomitantly, the role of the parents will also be reviewed in terms of the degree of their participation in the learning process and the expectations they have of children and teachers, as well.

2.1.1. Politeness and internal congruence

As 'significant adults', teachers are role models for learners to emulate. Not only should teachers be highly regarded for their management skills, but they should also be exemplars of politeness (Παπαδόπουλος, 2011, p.94). This precondition defines the role of the teacher in the sense that his or her behaviour ought to be consistent with the corresponding behaviour expected of learners. In other words, scolding a child for being disrespectful and then responding back impolitely in front of an audience is an irrational, not to mention ineffective, policy (Fontana, 1996b, p.188).

The concept of politeness therefore encompasses the notion of quality interaction, which is the cornerstone of all healthy relationships. Recent findings in the field of educational psychology point to the need for basic motivational conditions that can be realised by establishing a good teacher-student rapport (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008, p.58); quality teacher-learner interaction is dependent on the degree to which learners feel that the teacher can provide assistance and genuine interest in their achievements (Zedan, 2010, p.80). This kind of teacher behaviour ensures that the learners will experience low levels of anxiety, at least to a certain extent, since they will feel accepted and thus more self-confident.

2.1.2. Praise and reinforcement and their importance in an educational context

A very significant constituent of teacher-learner interaction is praise and, in effect, the degree of reinforcement attained through it. According to Brophy's definition (1981, p.5), the purpose of praise is "to commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration". Understandably, praise is a prerequisite for encouraging learners to insist on working harder; educators who tend to express their admiration of learners enhance their emotional welfare, simultaneously, enabling them to achieve higher learning objectives (Μαλικιώση-Λοϊζου, 2001, p.74).

The more learners achieve their learning objectives, the more prone they are to reach success in school. Considering the emotional dimension of school success, special attention should be cast on the frequency of praise and the extent to which a teacher accepts learners' feelings and ideas. These incidences of interaction are closely interwoven with the genuine interest and respect a teacher should first and foremost have towards his or her learners, as already stated. Research has shown that to maximize its effectiveness, praise should directly ensue successful performance, be realistic, and given by a person that learners like and admire (Fontana, 1996b, p.106-107).

It is true that most teachers find no difficulty in perceiving and praising instances of successful performance. However, Eken (1999, p.240) has contended that teachers are often carried away by the technicalities of what they do and fail to notice the psychological processes occurring throughout the lesson. One of these psychological processes is praising academic behaviour at the expense of social behaviour (Beaman and Wheldall, 2000, p.442). Some teachers may be caught in bureaucratic organizations that define the educational mission in a narrow sense, focusing only on academic standards (Allodi, 2010, p.96). Since the focus of this paper is human emotions, we cannot refrain from addressing the issue of social behaviour and its importance in an educational context.

2.1.3. Error correction: teacher response and learner reaction

By definition, error correction is anticipated to be anxiety-provoking since it entails the possibility of failure, at least in a specific task. For learners, especially young ones, an unsuccessful instance could be internalized as a form of punishment (Fontana, 1996b, p.112) inflicted by the teacher. Moreover, if a teacher resorts to harsh error correction, ridicule and untactful handling of mistakes in front of the class, learners are most likely to feel anxious (Oxford, 1999, p.65-66), not to mention demotivated. This kind of 'debilitating anxiety' is harmful to children since it challenges their self-worth (Oxford, 1999, p.60) as learners, and, by extension, as individuals.

It can be inferred from the above that teacher reaction to error is of critical importance for the learners. Errors, however, should not be regarded as an instance of failure; on the contrary, they should be viewed as an indispensable part of the learning process. The ultimate goal of error correction should be to equip learners with a range of strategies to cope with errors and learn from them (Fontana, 1996a, p.270). Teachers should also consider the anxiety factor and its debilitating effects on learner and, as von Worde (2003, n.p.) contends, opt for gentle error correction or even model the correct response. The teacher who can empathize with the feeling of fear and discouragement will be more acceptant to error, thus setting the grounds for the conditions for learning (Rogers, 1967, p.287).

2.1.4. Teacher perceptions about learner potential

Though quite implicit, teacher perceptions about learner potential are another aspect of teacher behaviour that may determine the outcome of a learning process. Back in 1948, Robert Merton coined the term 'self-fulfilling prophecy' to explain how a belief or expectation, whether correct or incorrect, affects the way an individual behaves. In a classroom context, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a teacher has an erroneous expectation about a learner, which causes the learner to behave in such a way as to confirm the originally false assumption (Jussim et al., 2009, p.349).

The self-fulfilling prophecy may be either positive or negative, namely a teacher may have high or low expectations about a learner. Whatever the case may be, the sheer truth is that this subconscious mechanism activates a series of reactions by the learners that determines the outcome of their performance. In a sense, holding erroneous expectations, whether positive or negative is incongruent with Maslow's notion of actualization; since actualization involves finding one's true potential, teachers should not impose their own expectations on learners.

2.1.5. Parent expectations about children and teachers

From an ecosystemic perspective, the quality of the interaction among teachers, learners and parents is of paramount importance; from a mere psychological aspect, it has been acknowledged that parent behaviour influences the child's personality development in three main patterns (Pervin and John, 1997, p.46-47):

- parents provide examples of their own behaviour that incurs a certain child behavior;
- they are role models to emulate;
- they reinforce behaviour selectively.

Apparently, all three factors are imbued with expectations that parents hold about their children's life. With regard to school life, parent expectations and their beliefs about children's potential seem to have an impact on their self-image and pursuit of accomplishment (Κωσταρίδου-Ευκλείδη, 1995, p.144). At this point, it is worth noticing that children as learners are the recipients of both teacher and parent expectations, which mean that the burden they have to lift may be unbearable, especially if such expectations, are not congruent. In this case, the children are susceptible to emotional instability, since they are confounded as to which 'ideal self' they should pursue. This is the reason why the ecosystemic approach calls for close collaboration among all parties involved, namely to counteract the effects of any diverse messages a child may receive.

3. Research design

3.1. Purpose and procedure

The purpose of the research being to explore the personal meaning attributed to emotions, a triadic interview pattern was followed; since we have discussed the interactive process the ecosystemic approach boasts, our subjects were learners, their parents and teachers. The aim being to examine the role of emotions from a multi-faceted perspective, we opted for a qualitative method as subjective experience would be mirrored through the actual emotions of the participants. (Long et al., 2010, p.5). In this respect, the instruments used were interviews and observation.

Regarding interviews, the format adopted was a structured one, as this would allow for comparability across participants (Dörnyei, 2007, p.135), which is the end result of the triple interview pattern. Furthermore, being classified as a qualitative method, interviewing was opted for since the rationale behind its use is that it values subjective experience by mirroring an individual's experience of the world (Long et al., 2010 p.5). With the research focusing on the importance of emotions, the interpretation of the emotions arisen thereof constitutes this qualitative method most appropriate for analysing subjective experience. As Dörnyei (2007, p.38) asserts, it is only participants themselves who can divulge the meaning of their experiences, hence deriving their interpretations from an insider perspective. This insider perspective is exactly what enables the researcher to access the inner world of the participants and observe emotions, thoughts or intentions (Ohata, 2005, p.140) that cannot be perceived otherwise, namely through an indirect quantitative method such as using questionnaires.

On the other hand, there is an element of risk that interviews entail. The subjective value that is attributed to them is self-contradictory. However valuable subjectivity may be for the participants' disclosure of their feelings and thoughts, the very same individual experience of reality may prove problematic for researchers themselves. Personal biases may not allow room for objective interpretations, which is required in order to render valid results. Qualitative research thereby is fundamentally interpretive, with the researcher's subjectivity held accountable for data interpretation (Dörnyei, 2007, p.38). Another risk factor pinpointed by Dörnyei (2007, p.141) is that participants may enter the interview session with preconceived ideas of what kind of responses would be preferred or dispreferred, thus self-censoring themselves and, in effect, rendering invalid results. Bearing in mind the constraints posed by the use of interviews as the sole method of research, we have also applied an observation scheme in order to confirm or disconfirm our original findings.

3.2. Sampling and constraints

With reference to the learner age group, we interviewed children from 9 to 11 years old since our aim was to investigate how beneficial or detrimental teacher behaviour might be in the early school years before learners' transition to secondary school. Upon choosing the learners we proceeded with addressing our request to their parents and teachers. As far as gender is concerned, inclusion of both genders was ensured across the entire sampling range. Regarding the setting, our research was conducted in southern Athens, Greece. A total of fifteen participants were interviewed, five from each category. Understandably, since all three groups are interrelated, there were a number of questions that were identical or overlapping, hence allowing for comparability among the three subject groups.

Concerning the constraints of the actual research, the teacher sample featured something particular; the original concept was to approach the principal of a primary school in southern Athens and acquaint him with the content of our research. Our plans, however, fell through since force majeure prevented us from consummating the research in that school. To be more specific, we managed to obtain data from the teachers only, since it was not feasible to arrange an interview schedule with the parents and learners. To overcome this hurdle, we appealed to the parents from the private language school where the researcher works, who agreed to be recorded and gave their consent to record their children as well. At the same time, we requested assistance from two English teachers working at the same language school, who also agreed to be interviewed. Conditioning the sampling in this way established the interrelation among the respondents that would have otherwise been rather disconnected since the teachers interviewed were not from the same school, as opposed to

the learners and parents. Originally, this was a setback since it disturbed the triadic pattern, which seemed to lack interrelation. To be more specific, three among the teachers worked at a public primary school whereas the other two worked at the private language school where the same learners studied. Initially, this discrepancy seemed problematic; however, according to Dörnyei (2007, p.128), variation within the respondents lends itself for exploration and could be valid if such pattern persists across the sampled diversity.

Having therefore ensured the contribution of all participants, the interviews were piloted to one representative from each group. Upon detecting one or two questions that required clarification, the research was eventually initiated. We first interviewed the teachers from the primary school in November 2011 and early in December 2011 we interviewed the teachers from the language school. By the end of December we had obtained interviews from the learners and their parents and in February 2012 the actual observation task was completed. The reason why observation was conducted much later than the interviews was that the time that had elapsed would make it nearly impossible for the teachers to remember their statements and act accordingly in a real classroom setting. Consequently, the findings would be more valid if the course of action was spontaneous and not predefined in advance by any claims made during the interviews. It can be deduced that we observed the two teachers from the language school, as we could not be granted permission to observe the teachers from the state school. The ideal research conditions would have been to have at least one representative teacher from the primary school, as this would provide an all-embracing picture of the situation. Given the constraints, we had no other choice but to compromise and consider these limitations when decoding the data we eventually managed to obtain.

3.3 Instruments: interviews and observation

3.3.1. School performance versus school success

We began our interviews by collecting some demographic data, which were necessary in order to shape the interviewees' profile. The first question we asked teachers was what school success entails. In the same vein, parents were asked what school performance encompasses. In this way, we triggered the parents to talk about behaviour, whereas the teachers were expected to mention the affective variable since allegedly they are more aware of the parameters beyond cognition that success in school comprises. Parents were additionally asked to mention some of the ways by which they monitor their children's school performance, since it has been attested that families' involvement in children's education is crucial to children's school success (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2009, p.176).

The next question was addressed to all three groups but worded differently to children so that they could understand it more easily. The participants were presented with a number of parameters, which they had to rank in terms of their significance for school success. When piloting the interviews, it was noticed that this list was required as a complementary follow-up to the first question since some of the teachers and parents were at a loss for words when presented with it. The list included both cognitive and affective factors, the purpose being to research which was considered more important, or whether there should be some kind of balance between the two.; to quote Epstein (2005, p.viii), successful learning and development are defined not only by achievement test scores, but also by a number of social and emotional skills and behaviours that learners develop. With regard to the learners, the objective was to investigate their attitudes towards school, since Epstein (2005, p.viii-ix) further contends that student attitudes about school were not so much correlated

with test scores and report card grades as they were with student participation in class. This contention depicts that active engagement on the students' behalf culminated in commitment to learning over the years. From the same list, parents were also asked to gauge what their offspring regarded as most important in schooling. Following their response, parents were further asked to give their own definition about school success; this time we aimed at cross-checking if they remained consistent with what they had answered in ranking the school performance factors earlier. The underlying principle was that if education is to be prioritized, the definition of learning should be expanded to include social and emotional learning, which are the cornerstones of academic success (Christenson et al., 2005, p.21).

3.3.2. *Teacher-learner interrelation*

After the rather general questions concerning school life, we proceeded with the more specific ones, those that centred on the role of the teachers and their behaviour. Teachers were required to define their relationship with learners; for this reason, they were given four options to choose from, namely collaborative, motherly/fatherly, strict, friendly or tender. Upon defining the kind of relationship with learners, teachers were asked if they would modify it on the assumption that it was ineffective. They then had to choose an alternative kind of relationship or a combined pattern. In practice, teachers are generally expected to demonstrate a wide range of interpersonal behaviour in order to interact with learners and arouse their interest (Yua and Zhub, 2011, p.313). Needless to say that each of the above types of relationships features some limits which when exceeded can be harmful for learners. In this respect, flexibility is a feature that was researched through this question, as readiness to adapt one's behaviour is among the qualities a teacher should have.

Simultaneously, teachers further elaborated on their behaviour towards learners by being asked if they have certain expectations about learner potential, whether positive or negative. As Orton (1996, n.p.) suggests, the relationship between teacher beliefs and student learning is based on the respect for people; hence, in a moral sense, the teacher is held responsible for creating the lion's share of the classroom events that lead to student learning. This refers us back to Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy. Once again, teacher beliefs and disbeliefs were tested in an attempt to consider how influential they might be within a learning context.

Regarding learners, they were in turn asked to define what the qualities of a 'good' teacher are. By doing this, learners provided their own insight into the notion of a good teacher and concurrently the ideal relationship with him or her. In the same vein, the issue of learner anxiety was raised; learners were asked to think of any instances during the lesson when they feel distressed. Krashen (1985, in von Worde, 2003 n.p.) has asserted that if anxiety impairs cognitive function, anxious students may learn less and may not be able to demonstrate their knowledge, which results in even more failure and further increases anxiety.

Since anxiety is debilitating, both parents and teachers were asked to speculate on the reasons why children may be inflicted with anxiety. Two perspectives were at the forefront, the subject-content difficulty and the interpersonal perspective. Studied from a subject-content perspective, teaching is analysed in terms of the subject matter and the incomprehensibility it may entail, whereas from an interpersonal perspective, once again effective teaching is contingent upon the relationship between teachers and learners (den Brok et al., 2004, p.409-410).

Another issue pertinent to the interpersonal relationship between teachers and learners is the degree of empathy teachers display towards learners. Learners were therefore asked if their teachers could empathize with them and sense their anxiety. This question is valuable because teachers are expected to reduce the level of anxiety learners experience and do their best not to adopt an attitude that is laden with distress for their learners. Authentically professional teachers should possess the ability to have warm and genuine relationships with their students so that the latter perceive the classroom environment in a more positive way (Allodi, 2010, p.96; Burnett, 2002, p.13).

3.3.3. Researching the use of praise and error correction

A positive classroom climate can be established on condition that there is no hostility among its participants. In this respect, we asked teachers how they use praise and reinforcement in order to confirm that a warm and supportive learning environment fosters high self-esteem and improves cognitive ability (Zedan, 2010, p.76). Likewise, we also asked teachers to state how they correct errors; our intent was to investigate if they use process feedback, which involves focusing on what can be learnt from mistakes through self-correction, as well as from the process of producing the correct answer (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008, p.64).

These two questions about praise and error correction were also addressed to learners who were required to testify about their teachers' attitude towards positive and negative feedback. According to Gray (1990, in Lipnevich, 2007, p.34), positive affect often following praise should increase individual's optimism concerning performance, thus causing an increase in effort and persistence. Evidently, too much negative feedback may have the opposite outcomes. The two sets of responses were subsequently cross-validated to detect the degree of correlation between them, namely if teacher beliefs about feedback were consistent with learner response to it.

3.3.4. Perceptions of the ideal teacher

The interviews were consummated by raising the issue of the 'ideal' teacher; learners and their parents were requested to list some of the qualities an individual should have in order to qualify for a teacher. The objective of this question was to confirm if learners appreciate those teachers who have good managerial skills and are understanding. Concerning the parents, they were additionally asked to express their preference for a teacher who is well-acquainted with his or her subject matter over one who would rather foster an interpersonal relationship with the children at both an emotional and social level. The polarization made here aimed at providing supporting evidence to the recent affirmation that affective and behavioural indicators of the effects of schooling might be more important than cognitive indicators (Fitz-Gibbon, 2006, p.303). With regard to the teachers, the corresponding question they had to answer was whether cognitive or emotional development was more important for learners, and which of the two variables teachers would find it difficult to contribute to. This last question is the key point of the present paper; over the years, schools have always assumed they could contribute to the affective and social development of their learners but comparatively little is known about how successful they are and how far they can go to achieve this development (Kong, 2008, p.112).

3.3.5. Observing the teachers

To confirm or disconfirm the findings derived from the interviews, an observation plan was designed, as explained earlier. Participant observation was conducted which, in our case,

was considered most appropriate for naturally occurring behaviours in their usual contexts (Woods, 2006, n.p.). For reasons beyond our power, as already stated, the only permission for class observation that we could obtain was from the private language school. Based on the responses the two English teachers had given, we drafted a tentative checklist for each observe, which was more of a guideline rather than a strict plan. We opted for a more open-ended plan, whereby certain instances of teacher-learner interaction were isolated and juxtaposed with the answers given to the interview questions. The two teachers were observed once each, since the observation outcome was satisfactory, that is, the findings were considered valid enough for our research design

4. Presentation and interpretation of findings

4.1. Distress factors

The actual research scheme, as already mentioned, focused on the kernel of our endeavour which is the importance of human emotion in a learning context and more specifically the significance of a healthy ecosystem among teachers, learners and their parents. In a nutshell, the findings revealed that there are instances of teacher behaviour that may make learners inhibited. Error correction, for instance may be a quite stressful factor for learners especially if the teacher does not display the corresponding degree of politeness and tactfulness when correcting. This was profound when the teachers were observed, as there seemed to be a discrepancy between their statements and the actual practice. For instance, even though the opposite was attested, time for a second chance was not sufficiently allocated, whereas one of the teachers was rather disheartening towards the children by reprimanding them whenever they said something wrong. An attitude as such depicts that the teacher may lack internal congruence and politeness, which should be a prerequisite for becoming a teacher. From a mere psychological perspective, if the teachers persist in being too harsh on learners for failing to perform well, the latter are likely to be discouraged, let alone disappointed. What is more it seems that teachers are often unaware of the effect of their behaviour on learners.

Learners are further burdened with anxiety if their significant adults hold self-fulfilling prophecies for them. All teachers admitted that they had held high or low expectations of their learners. They unanimously agreed that learners can sense such beliefs as anything that the teacher conveys either verbally or non-verbally is perceptible; another piece of evidence to uphold that teachers are liable for learner anxiety. On their part, parents have their own share of responsibility in hindering their offspring's emotional blooming; owing to their self-fulfilling prophecies, parents may be discouraging or with high demands regarding their children's school performance, which is a contributory factor to learner distress. This is confirmed by one parent who maintained that her son's anxiety permeates his family life, as well; a finding that winds up our discussion about the cardinal role of the ecosystemic approach.

4.2. The soothing role of praise and reinforcement

On the other side of the coin, it is praise and reinforcement which trigger positive emotions, thus boosting learners' self-esteem. Concerning the degree of praise and reinforcement they receive, children replied that they like being praised when performing well. Consequently, our findings consolidate that positive reinforcement a very powerful way of managing children's behaviour since it emphasizes new and positive work habits (Long et al., 2010, p.18), thus motivating children to sustain efforts in learning. Regarding the teachers, the

issue of praise was considered to be of utmost importance. They claimed that they invariably use praise throughout their lessons in order to boost their learners' self-confidence. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the causes for the lack of self-confidence among learners inevitably triggered the heated debate of teacher or parent liability. Two of the teachers shifted the blame to the parents, which corroborates our findings about the pivotal role of a healthy ecosystem.

4.3. Valuing humanism in education

The research also revealed that both parents and learners overrated teachers' humane profile and considered it conducive to better cognitive outcomes. Most parents claimed that they would opt for a teacher that would meet the affective needs of their children. In essence, these parents have taken into consideration that inhibition and ego barriers should be lowered (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p.10). The data obtained from the children about the same question more or less, converged to two points: the teacher should be polite and not reprimand the children in the event of error. The children also expressed the desire for a teacher who would 'understand them', in other words empathize with them in the Rogerian sense. They also noted that a teacher should be able to transfer knowledge and make it comprehensible to them, thus stressing the significance of the cognitive aspect as well.

We can thereby conclude that the learners would opt for a teacher who is first and foremost a person, not a sterile pipe through which knowledge is passed on (Rogers, 1967, p.287). In a similar vein, teachers were required to deem whether cognition or emotional welfare is more important for a child's development; upon responding to this question, they were asked to rate which area is the most demanding for a teacher to enact on. Two of the teachers believed that cognitive development is most important and hence more difficult for a teacher to contribute to because it is contingent upon learners' personal work and studying. However, the other three teachers prioritized emotional welfare since the emotional stability gained in the early years would accompany the child in adulthood as well.

5. Conclusion

Given the limited number of participants, understandably the outcomes may not be representative enough for the educational and scientific community in general. However, our endeavour might lend itself to future studies, which are likely to render significant results for the field. A potential research scheme would be to broaden the range of participants or even to conduct research for a much longer period of time. In this way, the findings would be more valid not to mention that more aspects of teacher behaviour could be researched. Additionally, contrary to the heterogeneity of the teacher group, a more homogenous group of participants could be selected, focusing either on teachers of the same discipline or from the same school. In this case, the findings might be further corroborated since they would feature a higher degree of interrelation. Our findings suggest that emotions are indeed considered to be of paramount importance in a learning context; there seems to be a consensus that most participants have reached with regard to the 'ideal' teacher behaviour. Without defying the importance of cognitive outcomes, our data has depicted that learners feel at ease and therefore are more motivated to learn if the teacher is affectionate and understanding. What is more, it can be inferred that the teachers themselves sustain efforts to create a non-threatening environment; however, teachers may not always perceive that, despite their good intent, some aspects of their behaviour, such as error correction and self-fulfilling prophecies may be quite discouraging for learners.

Negative emotions are a hindrance in school life, for which not only teachers but also parents bear the responsibility. In essence, this research has shown that parents value the emotional intelligence of a teacher, which means that they primarily rank teachers in order of personality qualities and not typical qualifications. As a result, positive emotions are desirable in education and, in this respect, it is at the discretion of both parents and teachers to collaborate systemically in order to cater for children's emotional needs and welfare.

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