MANAGING A PRIMARY SCHOOL CLASS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The main purpose of our research was to investigate how to practically manage a primary school class. In the course of the empirical section, we collected teachers' opinions about the perception of students' conduct by means of a standardized questionnaire. The results obtained are interesting: Teachers give a considerable value to collaboration among students, teachers and parents as a factor which influences the behaviour of the class in a positive way. Our results indicate that pre-established rules of correct behaviour (i.e. behaviour contract) create a more mature sense of responsibility in children that young. Finally, the results show that the teachers we tested have sometimes difficulty to manage the class and, on the contrary, use old repressing discipline. We suppose it may be caused by two reasons: the former is that teachers need to go deep into competences about managing an elementary class both theorically as practically during teacher's curriculum studiorum and training. The latter is that our pupils live during an historical period in which everything seems allowed; sometimes, families are loosing their leading role and are unable to give the young generation specific rules to behave the right way. Because of this, primary schools and teachers are often asked to be the most important point of reference for pupils. In our opinion this is an impossible demand for schools and teachers; we do suggest this problem has to be solved by a tight cooperation between school and family. The two institutions must have a leading role working together to train young generation to become responsible adults in a very near future.

Key words: class management, effective learning, contract behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking about a very old past, we recall memories of school often associated to obedience and to severe subordination to teacher's authority who made use of psychological and sometimes physical punishments. Memories like these are useful only to notice how different was our grandfathers' experience regarding discipline compared with the present idea of discipline at school: nowadays, indeed, physical punishment is not permitted at all and a teacher who may use this kind of discipline is condemned in public.

In the course of the last century, theories regarding discipline have changed; nevertheless, discipline is still a main worry both among naives teachers as expert ones. Having in front a class of respectful pupils is a dream for the majority of teachers: a dream which will probably remain a dream, because educators know precisely the objective to reach, but they do not how to obtain it. Classes,

books, scientific journals and all the written materials about this topic can help the teacher only partially, since the problem of discipline is often analysed from a theoretic point of view, whilst the teacher needs to cope every day with difficult and practical situations about discipline that have to be solved in the class.

The German author Bueb suggested the idea that in the second half of the XX century many concepts such as authority, obedience, submission and discipline were not considered important anymore, therefore loosing their relevance among teachers and parents, because of the influence of many anti-authoritarian movements (Bueb, 2006). However, teaching still preserves an authoritarian appearance, because it is based on "a will of orientating the action of another person." This appearance may causes an asymmetry in ruling power within a class of students: so there are conflicts arising from the teacher on one side who ask for a positive collaboration and participation of the pupils in the learning process, and the students on the other side who feel the teacher's imposition to develop competences an contents. If the teacher needs to force the learning process among the class, his power diminishes. The ideal situation would be the case in which pupils follow spontaneously and without constriction what the teacher is asking them: whilst their passivity is an indicator of teacher's failure. The main consequence of this conflict is that a teacher's educational power is not a permanent situation guaranteed from his/her leading professional role and from a moral duty of the students, as it was in the past, but it is a teacher's capacity which needs to be always keeping alive. In-fact, in a post-modern society, the legitimization of power has to be based on dialogue and on emotional and affective relationship between a teacher and his/her students.

Scientific literature about this subject has started to define many types of discipline strategies such as: preventive, supportive and corrective; whilst, at the same time, teacher's behaviour may be hostile, assertive or not assertive, democrat, authoritarian or permissive. Of course, there are some differences among various currents: for example, the "Humanistic" current gives more importance to the role of the pupil himself in the formulation and choice of the rules of behaviour. On the contrary, the "Behaviourist" current points out that the main role in the solution of any problem belongs to the teacher, who changes pupil's behaviour by means of positive or negative reinforcement (Phelan, 2004). The "Constructionist" current underlines the role of the teacher himself, who organizes interesting activities, but, at the same time, promotes the differences among student' style of learning: in this way he favours a real cooperation with his/her pupils, avoiding serious problems of discipline.

The approach towards discipline in class has changed and will change again, because the way of teaching is continuously modifying: teaching does not mean maintaining the discipline in class anymore, but positively managing the group class (Trophy, 1983; Sternberg &Williams, 2002). As

recently reported by Evertson: "... In the early 1970s classroom management was seen as separate from classroom instruction. Teachers' management decisions were viewed as precursors to instruction, and were treated in the literature as if they were content-free. The image was of a teacher first attending to classroom management, and then beginning instruction without further reference to management decisions. Research in the 1980s, however, demonstrated that management and instruction are not separate, but are inextricably interwoven and complex." (Evertson, 2013).

As Bucher and collaborators suggested: "Classroom management consists of strategies for assuring physical and psychological safety in the classroom; techniques for changing student misbehaviours and for teaching self-discipline; methods of assuring an orderly progression of events during the school day; and instructional techniques that contribute to students' positive behaviours" (Manning & Bucher, 2007). Managing a class involves students themselves to collaborate with the teacher: from care about teaching material to interest about the teaching method, from respect of the pre-established rules to avoid conflicts among peers. This different climate in the class should ameliorate the process of effective learning, enhancing the level of attention to lectures.

Sometimes managing a class implies the use of behaviour contracts. To be really effective, behaviour contracts need to be started at the beginning of the school year (Emmer *et al*., 1980; Evertson, 1989): in fact, as Evertson recently reported: "... in both elementary and secondary classrooms, the start of the school year is crucial to effective management. A significant aspect of this beginning is the teacher's establishment of expectations for student behaviour, which are expressed through rules and procedures." (Evertson, 2013). At the same time, contract behaviours has to be as precise as possible: the teacher must decide what he/she's expecting from students and rewarding/ not rewarding them depending on their behaviour.

EXPERIMENTAL DESCRIPTION

Aim of the research

The main aim of this preliminary research was to analyse teachers' perception of students' conduct attending Italian primary schools in Croatia.

Subjects

The empirical study was carried out in a sample of 65 teachers (60 males and 5 females).

Method

The anonymous questionnaire was preceded by some questions about study title, age and sex of the teacher him/herself. We made use of an Italian standardized questionnaire (see Salerni, 2005) entitled: "Questionnaire about teachers' perception of students' conduct at primary school."

Teachers were asked to express their level of agreement/disagreement following a Likert staircase such as: "Total agreement", "Agreement", "I do not know", "In disagreement", "Strong disagreement".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After obtaining the data by means of the mentioned questionnaire, we calculated the following statistics: the media of the replies (Mean); the lower evaluation to the reply (Min); the higher evaluation to the reply (Max) and the standard error. The results were resumed in 21 tables, but for a reason of shortness, we will show and explain only a few of the total tables.

Table 1: Teachers' perception of students' behaviour (Principal Rules of the Group)

A student shows a good behaviour if:	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard error
He/she does his/her home-works with regularity	65	0	5	4,14	0,12
He/she does not ask very often to go out of class	65	1	5	3,28	0,13
He/she enters school on time	65	0	5	4,43	0,09
He/she pays attention to lectures	65	2	5	4,51	0,07
He/she does a few absences	65	0	5	2,69	0,15
He/she keeps notebooks and diary in order	65	2	5	3,97	0,11
He/she brings books to school	65	2	5	4,23	0,1
He/she keeps desk in order	65	2	5	4,02	0,09
He/she does not copy during class-works	65	0	5	4,00	0,13

Table 1 shows the results about teachers' perception of students' social behaviour with respect to the rules of the group. Indeed, teachers gave great significance to students' behaviours such as: doing homework with regularity, entering school on time, paying attention to lectures, keeping notebooks and diary in order, bringing books to school, keeping desk in order, avoid copying during class-works. It is interesting to underline that our subjects gave a considerable value to the observance of the group's rules and to a good collaboration and communication between teachers-pupils and teachers-parents as factors which influence students' behaviour in a positive manner, creating, a good psychological climate which facilitates effective learning.

Table 2: Teachers' perception of students' behaviour (relationship between teachers and students)

A teacher is able to obtain a good behaviour of his/her class if:	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard error

He/she takes care about students' psychological problems.	65	0	5	4,17	0,1
He/she is able to involve the class in the teaching activity.	65	0	5	4,25	0,11
He/she encourages students to establish together rules of good behaviour.	65	0	5	4,28	0,1
He/she is able to adapt his teaching program to students' needs, trying to keep his/her lectures as interesting as possible.	65	0	5	4,35	0,09
He/she does not mortify pupils who do not have a good scholar performance.	65	0	5	4,35	0,11
He/she encourages pupils to speak out.	65	0	5	4,28	0,1
He/she is able to take into consideration students' opinions even if they are different from the ones he has.	65	0	5	4,26	0,09
He/she uses to have personal talks with students who have problems at school.	65	0	5	4,29	0,1

Table 2 shows the results about the relationship between teachers and students: it's relevant to notice that there was a good agreement among teachers on the fact that students' bad/poor behaviour may be improved making them feel more responsible of the possible consequences of their conduct without mortify the pupils, but encouraging them to talk to the teacher, to pay more attention to the school program and to respect the pre-established rules of the class.

Table 3: Teachers' perception of the their role as students' educators (relationship between teachers and families)

A teacher is able to obtain a good behaviour of his/her class if:	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**Standard error**
He/she avoids to involve parents in students' conduct problems.	65	0	5	2,15	0,12
He/she regularly informs parents about students' behaviour.	65	0	5	4,42	0,09

Table 3 shows the results about teachers' perception of the their role of educators with respect to families. Here also there is a great agreement within subjects about the ways to obtain a good class' behaviour.

Table 4: Teachers' perception of influence of TV programs on students.

Influence of TV programs on students' conduct.	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard error
TV programs usually show that life success does not depend on study effort.	65	2	5	3,97	0,09
TV programs usually show that respecting good rules of behaviour does not reward during a person's life.	65	0	5	3,89	0,12

Table 4 shows the results about teachers' perception of basic variables, such as influence of TV programs on students' behaviour. All subjects think TV programs have a great importance in carrying on negative cultural models. This result is especially important because a powerful media as television is showing to our students that negative cultural models are very attractive. TV programs show contents which are often passive and superficial, mainly telling the young generation that a person does not need to study with effort to find a job and to be a responsible adult in the future.

The most interesting results are showed in the following tables:

Table 5: Teachers' perception of possible solutions to ameliorate poor/bad students' conduct.

A teacher is able to ameliorate poor/bad students' conduct if:	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard error
He/she drives away students who disturb class lectures.	65	0	4	2,31	0,02
He/she write admonitory notes on the class-register to point out students' poor/bad behaviour.	65	1	5	3,62	0,01
He/she punishes pupils who do not pay attention during lectures.	65	1	5	3,51	0,01
He/she suspends a student who was already punished before.	65	1	5	2,92	0,01

Table 5 shows the results about teachers' perception of how to solve students' poor/bad conduct. Most of the teachers we tested have sometimes difficulty to manage the class and they prefer to use old repressing discipline.

Table 6: Teachers' perception of parents' role as children' educators

Teachers' perception of family's participation to students' life school.	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard error
Parents are not respectful of their children.	65	2	5	3,69	0,01
Parents are often in conflict with teachers.	65	0	5	3,34	0,01
Families do not know about children' behaviour in class.	65	1	5	2,89	0,01
Families and schools do not collaborate very much.	65	0	5	2,65	0,01

Table 6 shows the results about family's participation to children' school life and about the relationship between school and family. Although the sample we tested is not that big, this is an interesting result which shows that actual relationship between school and family is a poor one, although teachers ask for a deeper relationship between the two institutions (in fact all teachers agree they have to inform parents about children' conduct in class.)

CONCLUSION

Our results generally show that teachers gave a considerable value to the role of a good psychological climate among the class which facilitates effective learning. A productive climate is guaranteed from positive social interactions, from adherence to the educational project, from participation of the pupils to the very definition of the principal rules to follow, from collaboration with parents, from quality of teaching which should results interesting and involving for students. As a direct consequence, this productive climate positively influences the proper management of the class.

The results show also that the teachers we tested have sometimes difficulty to manage the class and they prefer to use old repressing discipline. This finding is in contrast when compared to the other results. We suppose it may be caused by two main reasons: the first is that teachers need to go deep into competences about managing an elementary class both teorically as practically during their *curriculum studiorum* and training. To support this hypothesis we found a similar result in an article by Merret and Whedall. As they literary reported: "... Nearly three quarters of them were dissatisfied with the preparation in this area of professional skills provided by their initial training courses. Many thought that their colleagues spent too much time on matters of order and control and 38% thought

that they, themselves, did also. Generally, they showed an interest in attending training courses in classroom behaviour management. Many felt that such training could reduce stress among teachers and might help to reduce troublesome behaviour among their pupils. Nearly all of them thought that it would be of benefit to their younger colleagues who were just beginning their careers."(Merret & Whedall, 1993).

The second reason is that our pupils live during an historical period in which everything seems allowed; sometimes families are loosing their leading role and are unable to give the young generation specific rules to behave the right way. Because of this problem, primary schools and teachers in particular are often asked to be the most important point of reference for pupils. In our opinion this is an impossible demand for schools, this problems needs to be solved by a tight cooperation between schools and families not by schools themselves. Both the two institutions should have a leading role in following child's behaviour and eventually in modifying it; they also should work together helping the young generation to be responsible adults in a very near future.

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