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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 142 (2014) 708 – 711

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

CIEA 2014

The empathy and communication – pride personality's dimensions of the teacher

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Abstract

In this article we put in evidence that the efficiency of the didactic process depends, among others, on the teacher's empathy and communication skills, features involved in the structure of psycho-pedagogical competencies. Although they are so important, very little attention is given to these features. The communication ability is just reduced to the capacity of presenting information in a synthetic and accessible manner. The effective listening capacity, the active listening behaviour and, first of all, the attitudes shown in the act of communication with the student are not taken into account. Empathy is considered to be necessary only in advising students and parents and in making knowledge accessible. This has a native basis, but is built through systematic learning, not only through teaching practice. The mentor's role is huge: a model and an advisor for the student who is preparing to become a teacher; the mentor must constantly use his empathy and communication skills. Our goal was to shape the two dimensions of a teacher's personality in our students, within a training programme performed in continuation of the teaching practice. This programme uses specific contents and methods focused on action and interaction.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

Keywords: empathy, communication skill, effective communication, basic personality, psycho-pedagogical competencies.

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of school education largely depends on the quality of the school curriculum, on its relevance in relation with the dynamic needs and demands of society, with the students' needs and abilities. On the other hand, it depends on the teachers' competencies, on the extent to which the personalities of the latter match the teaching profession.

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2. Theoretical approach

The didactic behaviour (shown in the analysis of educational situations, in making pedagogical decisions, developing and implementing teaching strategies, in inter-personal relationships, in teaching and assessing activities) expresses and is influenced by the teacher's personality.

Analyzing the basic personality structure defined by R. Iucu (1999) as „the complex and flexible psychological structure with which the teacher comes into the educational field”, one can identify two fundamental concepts: empathy and communication skills. Both are valued and integrated in psycho-social, psycho-pedagogical, managerial and even scientific competencies. Both are achieved by continuous and systematic learning. The basis for empathy is the empathic potential transmitted by general heredity, while the basis for communication is speech.

Teaching a course by means of a monologue does not incite students' motivation, since they consider themselves ignored in this one direction communication. The way in which a teacher communicates with his/her students is important, and if he/ she uses attractive ways to display information through interaction, the results will be immediate (Duță, 2010: 19).

Emotional characteristics of teachers are very important as well, especially in creating classroom climate that could enable students' learning capacities (Djigić & Stojiljković, 2011, in Stojiljković, 2014). There are many definitions of the term 'empathy'. Empathy is defined as caring for other people and having a desire to help them (Hoffman, 1978), but also as knowing what the other person is thinking or feeling (Davis, 1983 in Stojiljković, 2014).

As far as the behaviour of the mentors of future teachers is concerned, our observations from the teaching practice and the discussions with the students led us to the following conclusion: among all the competencies, the abilities and features required for performing a teaching act, the empathy and communication skills are given the least importance. The communication ability is just reduced to the capacity of presenting information in a synthetic and accessible manner. The effective listening capacity, the active listening behaviour and, first of all, the attitudes shown in the act of communication with the student are not taken into account. Empathy is considered to be necessary only in advising students and parents and in making knowledge accessible. Its role in guiding the students' cognitive actions and in assessment is deemed to be negligible.

3. Method

Starting from this data, we pursued two objectives. The first consisted in making students aware of the importance of the two concepts which represent not only the conditions, but also the significant resources for an effective learning.

The second objective was to develop the communication abilities and empathic potential in the group of students. In order to achieve these objectives, we developed and implemented a programme of formative exercises, together with the students in the first academic year. The improving research was focused on a formative programme which included a theoretical part (basic concepts) and a significant practical part. The programme was first performed in the academic year 2008-2009 and it was then resumed with other students in the first semester of the academic year 2013-2014, in ten 2-hour sessions.

4. Conclusion and discussion

The goals of this programme were:

- to create awareness about the importance of communication and empathy within the instructive-educational process;
- to develop the communication skill (presentation, listening) and the empathic potential;
- to improve the necessary attitudes for effective communication and relationship formation.

The contents used were the following:

- the structure of the act of communication; the specific operations of the sender and of the receiver; the complexity of the sender and receiver roles within the didactic process; the factors influencing collocutors; transactional analysis and communication.
- the forms of communication (comparative analysis): verbal, nonverbal, paraverbal; referential communication (from factual data, concepts, ideas, theories), procedural communication (of modalities, of operation, the use of scientific truths), behavioural communication (of feelings, personal attitudes in order to value the messages and the collocutor); instrumental communication (intentional, oriented towards the achievement of thoroughly defined purposes), subjective communication (expresses a discharge or affective balance), accidental communication; vertical affective (between people of different status), horizontal communication (between people of similar status).
- malfunctions of didactic communication: attitudes, generating factors, elimination, mitigation and prevention strategies.
- effective teaching: effective presentation; true listening; attitudes toward students (interrogative, interpretative, evaluative, comprehensive, supportive); valences of silence; role and requirements of questions; feedback (functions, types, requirements); students' non-attention behaviour.
- persuasion as an educational means – valences and limits; valences of cognitive and affective conflict; strategies for creating and using a cognitive conflict.
- psycho-social phenomena and processes specific to the educational process: emotional relationships, inter-knowledge, inter-influence, attraction, emulation, group affectivity, implicit normativity of the school group, adaptation, cooperation, inter-personal conflict.
- empathy; personal space; interlocutors' attitudes; negative effects of irony; valences and limits of praising.

Implemented strategies:

- brain storming presentation followed by a debate on basic concepts;
- front work, team work and independent work;
- roleplay and creative drama (authoritative teacher during assessment, temperament types and behaviours shown during the acts of teaching – learning, temperament types and behaviours shown in during assessment, the teacher and the student's parent, the controversy between people with different temperaments);
- case study; the cases analyzed were taken over from the situations met in teaching practice, from students' experience as pupils, from the works of Panisoară (2006);
- communication exercises: interrupting the speaker (by the teacher and then by a colleague, in order to give other opinions, interpretations, solutions); guiding the speech to another direction; imposing solutions; showing negative feedback while the student delivers his speech; communication performed in the noise coming from the classroom or from outside; interrupting the speaker with challenging or clarifying questions about the causes, consequences, applications; showing some false listening attitudes toward the speaker; conflict between verbal communication and non-verbal/paraverbal communication; progressively reducing the distance between the receiver and the speaker until the occupation of the latter's personal space; identifying, in certain given situations, some methods of drawing interest at the beginning of the didactic communication; listing the methods of re-drawing interest; formulating different types of questions; listing questions imposed by different types of texts; organizing the contents of some given lessons and making such contents available; exercising the creation of a cognitive conflict; using controversy; listing advantages and limits of cooperation between pupils; listing advantages and limits of competitions between pupils; observing the behaviours shown by the speaking student during speech delivery and during participation in group work;
- the fishbowl method, used to analyze the relationship between verbal and non-verbal/ paraverbal communication (students organized in groups were asked to alternately watch the behaviours and interactions of the colleagues who were discussing an issue and then they were asked to discuss another issue while watched by their colleagues);
- the panel discussion, used to form the ability of formulating a message and valuing and synthetically presenting messages to collocutors;

- the critical incident method, taken over from Peretti, Legrand and Boniface (2001), was adapted; it included the following stages: the teacher presents the information about a situation; each participant makes an information by addressing questions to the teacher about the reasons and context of the situation; one participant synthesizes the information; the whole group formulate the first solutions with the help of and under the guidance of the teacher; each participant makes an independent analysis of the solutions; the solutions are analyzed within the teams; a representative of each group presents the solutions in front of the others; the solutions of the group are assessed by a collective debate;
- the Phillips 66 method was used in order to form dialogue skills, to synthetically present the ideas of the colleagues in a coherent form, giving arguments, to critically analyze the ideas of the colleagues;
- the gestual questioning method, taken over from Peretti, Boniface and Legrand (2001) was practiced for the ability to use non-verbal language and to interpret the same language of the interlocutor: the teacher addresses questions to the group of students and requests individual answers formulated in a pre-established non-verbal code; the questions asked are about the teaching practice, the history and economic activity of Buzau county;
- the table-tour method, taken over from Peretti, Boniface and Legrand (2001), was used in order to form the ability to present information in a synthetic and persuasive manner and the ability to self-informing, from the presentations made by the interlocutors;
- the list of books, taken over from Peretti, Boniface and Legrand (2001), was aimed at cultivating the capacity to identify the preference of the others;
- exercises of imagination related to possible future situations: what would I feel if I were criticized/ praised objectively/ non-objectively in front of my colleagues?; what if the teacher asked me to make comments on his/her speech? what if the teacher asks me to present an issue about the course/ seminar in front of the year/group mates and I have not prepared myself in advance?; what would I feel if the teacher assessed me asking to stand in front of my group mates?
- roleplay with subjects from the didactic work.

At the end of the programme I gave my students a questionnaire about the requirements of empathic communication and manifestation. Their answers, as well as their appraisal for the whole programme showed the increase of their awareness about the two concepts. During the teaching practice performed by the students in the second semester I noticed their special care for the act of communication and the effective use of their own empathy, not only in their relationship with the pupils but also in the preparation of their teaching activity.

Thus, the formative programme implemented to the students in the first academic year enabled me not only to raise their awareness of the two dimensions of the didactic personality, but also to teach effective communication and empathic behaviour.

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