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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE CLASSROOM AND THE CLASSROOM CLIMATE

ABSTRACT: The quality of school work greatly depends on the level of involvement and participation of all individuals in the educational process. However, student participation in the educational process has not yet become part of educational practice. This led us to research the effects of actively involving students into the educational process on their perception of class climate. The sample consisted of 58 students from primary and secondary schools. Using the Flanders Analysis of Classroom Interaction, we observed eight hours of classes in each classroom and found that secondary students are most actively involved, while the least active in class are the eight grade primary school students. After observation, the students filled out a questionnaire that helped us evaluate their views on the classroom climate. Surprisingly, the classroom climate received a higher evaluation in classes with lower student participation and lower in classes where student participation was higher.

Key words: classroom climate, democratic school, student participation in class.

ODNOS IZMEĐU UČENIČKOG UČEŠĆA U NASTAVI I ATMOSFERE U UČIONICI

APSTRAKT: Kvalitet školskog rada u velikoj meri zavisi od nivoa učešća svih pojedinaca uključenih u obrazovni proces. Međutim, učešće učenika u obrazovnom procesu još nije postalo deo obrazovne prakse. Stoga u ovom radu istražujemo koje su posledice aktivnog uključivanja učenika u obrazovni proces po njihovu percepciju atmosfere u učionici. Uzorak se sastoji od 58 učenika iz osnovne i srednje škole. Koristeći Flandersovu analizu interakcije u učionici posmatrali smo osam sati nastave u svakom razredu i ustanovili da su najaktivniji srednjoškolci, dok su na času najmanje aktivni učenici osmog razreda osnovne škole. Nakon opservacija, učenici su popunili upitnik koji nam je pomogao da ocenimo njihovo viđenje atmosfere u učionici. Iznenađujuće je da je atmosfera u učionici dobila više

ocene u razredima sa manjim učeničkim učešćem i niže ocene u razredima u kojima je učeničko učešće bilo veće.

Ključne reči: atmosfera u učionici, demokratska škola, učeničko učešće u nastavi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy should represent an integral part of everyday school life and should play a major role in the communication of everyday situations, negotiations and resolution of conflicts, and in the planning of everyday class life (Thornberg, 2010). One of the main characteristics of democracy is participation, which is regarded as the fundamental children's right (Sturzenhecker 2005) and is becoming an increasingly important concept when it comes to decision making (Kodela & Lesar 2015). As emphasized by Lansdown (2010), the realisation of children's participation needs to be understood as moving from perceiving children as passive receivers towards valuing children as active participants who contribute towards their own well-being.

School, as a state and social institution, plays a key role in developing the democratic values of its future citizens (Kodela & Lesar 2015). Therefore, modern school teachers should provide conditions for active learning and students should increasingly participate in all phases of the educational process (Javornik Krečič 2003).

The following article deals with student participation, focusing on the relationship between student participation and classroom climate. Since students spend most of their lives in school, it is important that, in addition to active learning and involvement in the educational process, we also provide them with a stimulating learning environment that responds to their needs.

2. CLASSROOM CLIMATE

School is a complex and open social system with its own structure, values, goals, rules and methods. It is an institution where climate mainly depends on the relationships between students, teachers and the management. Furthermore, specific climates are formed on classroom levels based on the processes and relationships between the individuals in the classroom (Rupar 2004). Classroom climate is created by all classroom events that include mutual relationships between students, students' personal development, and the systematic characteristics of the classroom. This represents an important starting point for the teacher's work in the classroom and influences the students' overall success, their

cognitive development, their learning motivation and their self-image (Maxwell & Chmielewski 2008; Roskam & Nils 2007).

Positive school and classroom climates affect both cognitive as well as non-cognitive outcomes of individuals (Zgaga 2018). Students learning in a positive classroom climate tend to have a more positive attitude towards school and school subjects and consequently achieve better learning results (Brust Nemet & Velki 2016). Additionally, they are less frequently victims of peer violence (Rucinski 2015).

Positive school and classroom climates are shaped by the relationships between individuals involved in the creation of class work, management methods, class rules, classroom organization and school culture (Ažman 2012). However, the most important factor in creating a positive classroom climate is the teacher-student relationship, which is based on good communication, negotiation skills and team work. These are the ingredients of a good teacher-student relationship that create mutual trust, which is the precondition for a positive classroom climate (Ozimič 2016). In addition, quality communication skills of the teacher greatly affect the school and classroom climate, since it is the teacher who listens to students' ideas, encourages them and acknowledges their progress (Adlešič 2002). A positive atmosphere can only be created by cooperation, teamwork and open communication (Ažman 2012).

When Ozimič (2016) analysed the study results, she found that students are much more motivated and successful in classes with predominately democratic relationships. Students feel important, accepted and relaxed in such school environments since they know they can express their opinions freely. All of the above contributes to boosting their self-esteem and developing positive values, such as encouragement, trust, etc.

3. STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Classroom adolescent participation is a topic that is becoming more frequently discussed in relation to the quality of school work. The latter greatly depends on the level of involvement and participation of all individuals in the education process (Kovač, Resman, & Rajkovič 2008). Participation thus presents an important aspect of the contemporary society (Marovič, Bajželj & Krajnčan 2014) and is an integral part of school culture. The degree of student participation forms the degree of student school work motivation, which affects the quality of school work (Kovač et al. 2008). Participation is also one of the educational goals. Consequently, the contemporary pedagogical processes should be based on

democratic school and class climates and relationships (Kovač Šebart & Krek 2007).

The contemporary school is a place of independent and active learning (Pribićević, Miljanović, Odadžić, Mandić & Županec, 2017) that requires students to take on the role of active participants in the educational process (Blažič, Ivanuš Grmek, Kramar & Strmčnik 2003; Mithans & Ivanuš Grmek 2012; Štefanc 2005), whereas it is the teachers' task to fulfil the necessary conditions (Šagud & Hajdin 2018).

In all aspects, political, professional and moral, active participation is more noticeable in the classroom since this is where students and their peers spend the majority of their time while at school. If the classroom climate is encouraging and well guided by the teacher, this can lead to the development of a very active and productive community (Kovač 2008). Teachers and students are subject to constant interaction in the classroom. Thus, a classroom can be defined as a complex system of interactive communication (Marentič Požarnik 2016).

Students can participate on all levels of the teaching-learning process, such as planning, preparation, learning new educational topics and the evaluation of knowledge.

During the planning phase, the teacher must present the objectives, take into consideration the students' objections, encourage them to make suggestions on what to add to the educational content, negotiate with them about the required tasks and take into consideration their wishes and interests. This kind of approach creates conditions for active student participation in the classroom (Ivanuš Grmek et al. 2007).

When new educational material is to be covered in the classroom, class activities and the relationship between the teacher and students become a communication process, where the teachers' and students' roles are interchanged and supplemented and student participation intensifies (Kramar 1990). The student becomes an active participant, who wants to gain knowledge independently or with the help of the teacher. Students can actively participate in forming the tasks or work objectives, the selection of teaching methods and the use of knowledge in practice (Adamič 1990).

During the examination and knowledge assessment phase, students have the option to participate in the decision-making process by negotiating with the teacher about the content and forms of examination and knowledge assessment, about the criteria for knowledge assessment such as setting deadlines and specifying the examination conditions, and about the possibility of self-examination and group assessment. Students should also be able to discuss with the

teacher the possible ways of raising bad grades and the possibilities to disagree with the teacher's grading (Rutar Ilc & Rutar 1997).

All of the above leads to the conclusion that there are opportunities for student participation on all levels of the teaching-learning process. By involving students teachers can build students' motivation (Alfirević 2015; Despotović 2017). Participation in the decision-making process can only be realistically implemented if "professional and ethical aspects are established. According to these aspects, the students have the right to express their opinions and suggestions regarding the classroom, school work and relationships in the class" (Resman 2005: 92). In these circumstances the teacher's role changes from a transferer of knowledge to an active creator of conditions necessary for learning. On the other hand, students take on the role of active participants in their learning process (Javornik Krečič 2003).

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rapid technological development and the growing student awareness have led to the fact that contemporary students want to be included in all matters that concern them (McDonald 2006). Students spend a large amount of their time in school and care about the flow of school organization. Their participation is as important as the participation of all other school agents, which is why students should be granted the opportunity to express their opinions about the work that concerns them. The number of students in a school greatly outnumbers the rest of the school staff. Accordingly, they play a very important role in shaping both the school climate and school culture by bringing along habits, traditions, interests, fashion trends, et cetera. They create their own student school culture, which represents an important part of the school culture as a whole (Kovač 2008).

Education pedagogical workers should include students in educational decision-making or at least ask for their agreement, since students cannot take responsibility for something they did not agree to. If students lack the opportunity to take part in the educational goals and processes, they will not feel included in the educational results. Consequently, they will merely become objects, disabled from acquiring knowledge and values (Blažič et al. 2003).

Decision making and participation in pedagogical processes are necessary and represent the foundations for satisfying the students' need to manage their own time and strengths. Students, especially older ones, have difficulties dealing with their subordinate learning position and perceive their teacher's superior position as disrespect of their personality.

Based on the research results by Grunmann et al. (1998), we can conclude that students who are given plenty opportunities for participation in their school experience its environment as harmonious and friendly, feel good in school and are motivated. This is reflected in their positive behaviour towards the school and their tendency to use it as a place where they can actively spend their free time. In such schools the relationship between students and teachers is excellent and students find it easier to identify with the school as a whole.

In their research, Kötters, Schmidt & Ziegler (2001) also examined how student participation affects their well-being. They found that students who are given more opportunities for taking part in decision-making feel much better than their peers. Participation positively affects their self-confidence and reduces stress levels. In addition, the researchers found that the relationships between students and teachers are more positive, students tend to like school more and experience less frustration.

The positive correlation between student participation and well-being in school was also confirmed by Krüger (2001) in his research of 5th and 8th graders from 14 different schools and by De Roiste et al. (2012), who included students aged from 10 to 17 from 215 Irish schools. A positive correlation between student participation, their well-being and health was confirmed by the results of the study by John-Akinola and Gabhainn (2014), who included students aged 9 to 13 from 231 different schools.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5. 1. Study Aims

After reviewing Slovenian and foreign literature on the subject, including studies conducted by authors such as Grundmann, Kötters & Krüger (1998), Kovač (2008), Gril, Klemenčič & Autor (2009), Kurth Buchholz (2011) and Pšunder (2015), we found that there is a discrepancy between the need and the actual implementation of student participation in schools. In an extensive study, which was conducted as part of a doctoral study and presented in a doctoral dissertation by Mithans (2017), we attempted to determine the areas where students already perceive the opportunities for participation and the areas where students want to participate, but haven't been able to. We identified teachers' attitudes towards participation and searched for similarities and differences between student participation of younger and older students in primary school classrooms based on students' knowledge, study motivation and classroom climate satisfaction.

The present study investigates the relationship between student participation in classroom interaction and their classroom climate perception. Therefore, the aim of the present research is to examine whether students who participate more actively in the educational process evaluate classroom climate as more positive.

5.2. Participants

The research sample includes fifth-grade primary school students aged 10 to 11, eighth-grade primary school students aged 13 to 14, and 16 to 17-year-old second-year secondary school students from Slovenia. The sample included 58 students, of whom 16 (27.6%) students attended the fifth and 16 (27.6%) the eighth grade. Twenty-six (44.8%) students attended the second year of secondary school.

5.3. Instrumentation

The data were collected by observing classes using the Flanders analysis protocol, based on examining who initiates conversation at a certain moment, who responds to it and how. The aim of this analysis is to divide the classroom's verbal communication into the following five categories: teacher's reaction, teacher's initiative, student's reaction, student's initiative, and silence or confusion as a result of unclear communication (Tomić 2002). The teacher initiates by explaining educational content, asking questions and assessing students' answers. The students initiate by asking questions, expressing ideas, explaining experiences or by giving long answers based on their own opinions. The students' brief answer to the given question is merely a response. If teachers can recognize students' emotions, they can respond to their students' initiative by praising, encouraging, and accepting them, and acknowledging their ideas. In order to determine which of the above-mentioned parts of communication take place in the classroom, the observer must first identify them and mark what is happening in the classroom in the appropriate section in a time interval of 3-5 seconds, and then add up the marks to determine how much of the lesson each of the above-mentioned categories covered (Marentič Požarnik & Plut Pregelj 2009). Observation during class thus enables a detailed analysis of students' speech participation in the classroom.

Eight hours of lessons were observed in each classroom. In order to determine the student participation variable, we used the F 9 category, Independent Student Statements, since this category is defined as the expression of new ideas, impressions and opinions (Marentič Požarnik & Plut Pregelj 2009). The number of

detected occurrences of F 9 was converted into the ordinal level, which gave us a three-level (low, medium and high) student participation variable.

After finishing our observation, the students filled out a questionnaire. In order to determine the students' assessment of classroom climate, we used the two-part Classroom Learning Environment Questionnaire (Zabukovec 1998). The first part of the questionnaire deals with the evaluation of the existing classroom climate and the second part deals with the evaluation of the desired classroom climate. For our research, we used the first part of the questionnaire, which contains 21 statements (Zabukovec 1998), such as 'We put a lot of effort into what we do', 'The students in our classroom know each other very well', 'The teacher spends very little time talking to the students', etc.

Students responded to statements related to the existing classroom climate with "agree" and "disagree" (Zabukovec 1998). We assigned points to the students' responses. The response "agree" was assigned 2 points and the response "disagree" was assigned 1 point. Statements 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, 15, 19, 20 were assigned points in the reverse order. The highest possible number of points was 42 and the lowest 21.

A high number of points indicates a high level of interpersonal social contacts, good support from the teacher, active students, order in the classroom, good organization and clear setting of rules. A low number of points indicates the opposite (Zabukovec 1998).

5.4. Data analysis

The data was processed with SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). We used frequency distributions (f, f %) in the first phase of our analysis. In order to determine the classroom climate differences in accordance with student participation in the class we used the one-way analysis of variance "ANOVA".

6. RESULTS

The students evaluated the classroom climate by filling out questionnaires. The basic statistical characteristics of the classroom climate variables are indicated in the table below.

	MIN	MAX	*M*	*SD*	KA	KS
Climate	27	41	34.328	3.430	– 0.154	– 0.848

Table 1. Basic descriptive statistics of cumulative results of classroom climate measurements

As the results in Table 1 indicate, the distribution of the variable *climate* is fairly symmetrical, indicated by the result - 0.5 < KA < + 0.5, and normal, + 0.9 < KS < + 0.1. The level of variability is low as given by the result KV % under 13%. Evidently, this is the dominating average level of satisfaction with the classroom climate in the fifth and eighth grades of primary school and in the second year of secondary school.

We measured the participation level of the whole class of students with the Flanders Analysis of Classroom Interaction and were not interested in the participation level of an individual student. The data are presented in Table 2 below.

Class	Student participation	f	%
8th grade	low	16	27.6
5th grade	medium	16	27.6
2nd year of secondary school	high	26	44.8
	Total	58	100.0

Table 2. Number (f) and structural percentage (f%) of students according to student participation in the classroom

Table 2 indicates that a high level of student participation was measured for 44.8% of second year secondary school students. A medium level of student participation was measured for 27.6% of fifth graders and the same percentage, 27.6%, was measured for eight graders at a low level of student participation. The results show that a higher level of student participation can be found among older students, a medium level among fifth-graders and a low level among eighth-graders.

A one-way analysis of variance "ANOVA" was used to test the differences in the perception of classroom climate according to the levels of student participation. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Student Participation	n	M	SD	Arithmetic Mean Difference Test	
				F	P
low	16	35.188	0.984	0.704	0.499
medium	16	34.125	0.894		
high	26	33.923	0.595		

Table 3. The variance analysis results of examining the differences in classroom climate in regard to student participation

The results indicate that there is no significant statistical difference in climate (P=0.499) in regard to the level of student participation. Nevertheless, attention was paid to arithmetical means. Classroom climate is rated as high when student participation is low and low when student participation is high. This finding is surprising, since a number of studies have shown that climate is positively correlated with participation (Grundmann et al. 1998; Kötters, Schmidt & Ziegler, 2001; Kovač 2008). Kovač (2008) claims that participation is more frequent on the class level and when the classroom climate is encouraging. This creates conditions for the development of an active and productive class community.

7. DISCUSSION

The study results indicate that secondary school students more actively participate in the classroom, while primary eighth-grade students are the least active.

As assumed by Ivanuš Grmek et al. (2007), teachers tend to regard older students as more competent, capable and mature than younger students and put more effort into engaging older students in the teaching-learning process. We believe this is the reason for measuring a higher level of participation among older students. In our opinion, the lower level of participation in the eighth grade of primary school is due to the lack of engaging younger students in the education process. The researched eighth graders lack experience of being included in the teaching process throughout their primary school education and by the time they reach the eighth grade, they rather avoid participating if they should be encouraged to do so.

Teachers could motivate students to speak up and to participate by constantly encouraging them to express their opinions and views, since "both language as well as speaking skills can only be developed through language use" (Marentič Požarnik & Plut Pregelj 2009: 60).

The teacher plays a central role both in encouraging active communication among their students, as well as in leading the conversation. The teacher's style of conversation can influence the students' motivation to participate. In addition, the teacher's method of leading the conversation encourages trust and cooperation in the classroom (Marentič Požarnik & Plut Pregelj 2009).

Furthermore, we find that the class climate was evaluated as the best in classes where students did not perform as active participants in the communications process. In our opinion, this is due to the fact that the observed

students did not acquire the experience of actively participating in the educational process. Hence, they are more comfortable in an educational environment where active participation is not required.

The fact is that the educational process does not give students many formal rights to participate in the decision-making process. School work is not based on the principle of political democracy and, for example, students cannot select the teachers, number of lesson hours, subjects, etc. Therefore, students will never be equal partners in the decision-making process (Resman 2005). The goal of democratic education can only be achieved if students are given the right to participate in the decision-making process whenever possible (Kovač Šebart & Krek 2007). It is the teachers' task to enable active student participation whenever there are opportunities to do so and thus lead the students towards a democratic style of education.

Maretič Požarnik (2016) claims that democratic teachers present and explain the main objectives and criteria for knowledge assessment to students and encourage them to share their ideas and suggestions. Democratic teachers are focused on creating positive relationships and encouraging high-quality communication among the participants in the education process. We are convinced that participation should and can be integrated in the educational practice by regularly educating teachers so they comprehend the necessary concepts and teaching methods that facilitate a more successful inclusion of students in class.

8. CONCLUSION

We presented our research results to teachers and headmasters and thus helped to raise the awareness of how important it is to actively involve students in the educational everyday life. Additionally, we regularly integrate the research results and findings in the study process of future primary school teachers.

The findings present a rather modest but nevertheless important contribution to highlighting the issue of active student participation in the educational process. Given that the concern for student participation is one of the fundamental educational objectives, this phenomenon should continue to be explored in the future.

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ODNOS IZMEĐU UČENIČKOG UČEŠĆA U NASTAVI I ATMOSFERE U UČIONICI

Sažetak

Svaki razred u školi ima svoju specifičnu, jedinstvenu atmosferu, koja značajno utiče na funkcionisanje razredne zajednice. Atmosfera u učionici se formira kroz odnose između učenika, kao i između učenika i nastavnika i može da bude pozitivna ili negativna. Razredi sa pozitivnom atmosferom predstavljaju sredine u kojima preovlađuju prijateljski odnosi i gde se učenici osećaju prihvaćenima. Pored toga, podsticajna atmosfera u razredu motiviše učenike, pozitivno utiče na kvalitet njihovog znanja i sprečava strah od škole. Dobri odnosi puni poštovanja osnova su za stvaranje pozitivne atmosfere i kvalitetnog obrazovanja pošto su svi učesnici u obrazovnom procesu aktivno angažovani. Aktivno

učešće primetnije je na nivou razreda pošto učenici provode najveći deo vremena u školi sa vršnjacima iz razreda. Savremena škola bi trebalo da učenicima omogući aktivno učenje i učešće u svim nivoima obrazovnog procesa. Učešće u donošenju odluka kako na nivou škole tako i u samom razredu, daje učenicima osećaj vrednosti i motiviše ih da uče. Kvalitet školskog rada u velikoj meri zavisi od nivoa učešća svih pojedinaca uključenih u obrazovni proces. Međutim, učešće učenika u obrazovnom procesu još nije postalo deo obrazovne prakse. Stoga u ovom radu istražujemo koje su posledice aktivnog uključivanja učenika u obrazovni proces po njihovu percepciju atmosfere u učionici. Istraživanje je sprovedeno na uzorku od po 16 učenika iz petog i osmog razreda osnovne škole i 26 učenika iz drugog razreda srednje škole. Koristeći Flandersovu analizu interakcije u učionici posmatrali smo osam sati nastave u svakom razredu i ustanovili da su najaktivniji srednjoškolci, dok su na času najmanje aktivni učenici osmog razreda osnovne škole. Nakon opservacija, učenici su popunili upitnik koji nam je pomogao da ocenimo njihovo viđenje atmosfere u učionici. Iznenađujuće je da je atmosfera u učionici dobila više ocene u razredima sa manjim učeničkim učešćem i niže ocene u razredima u kojima je učeničko učešće bilo veće.

Ključne reči: atmosfera u učionici, demokratska škola, učeničko učešće u nastavi.