HEALTHY INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPMENT AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS FROM ADOLESCENT STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The text emphasizes the necessity to develop healthy interpersonal relationships among adolescents at secondary schools. Peer relationships are viewed from various perspectives – considering social and psychological characteristics of adolescence and prevention of social pathology phenomena. The text also introduces a research project which included a social skills training as a form of relationships support in first-year secondary school classes. Results were qualitatively analyzed and showed noteworthy information which proved the fact that social skills development and relationships support should be an adequate part of the educational process at secondary schools.

Keywords: adolescents, peer group, interpersonal relationships, social skills training, secondary school

Introduction

School represents extremely dynamic environment where we can observe various interactions among different participants of the educational process on different levels and within different social groups. Students start secondary schools at the age of fifteen – at the turn of early and late adolescence. The primary goal of their secondary education is their professional career education or preparation for tertiary education. Secondary school teachers frequently pay strict attention to these educational tasks. However, both research and practical experience show that secondary school students have a strong need to build solid and consistent interpersonal relationships, which help them to cope with demanding situations and also with every day study tasks.

The following text will briefly introduce a research project, which focused on development of healthy relationships at secondary schools. It means relationships which create acceptable study environment, support students' motivation toward school attendance and learning new skills and knowledge. The target group of the research included adolescents who attended secondary schools. Interpersonal relationships at schools will

be viewed from their perspective and thus reduced to peer relationships in secondary school classes and students – teachers relationships. This approach follows social-psychological paradigm of school functioning.

Students and their teachers

Perception, communication, and interaction features of social relationships at schools have their specific outcomes. Social relationships at schools represent fundaments of educational processes. Successfully developed social relationships support the realization of all educational goals. Teachers undoubtedly play a key role in this process. They are significant adults who support students' development within school environment. The relationships between students and teachers are mainly asymmetrical and connected with school subjects. Curriculum is a content element of school life but its process and results depend on a broader interactive context. Peer relationships present its important part; they are symmetrical, but autonomous. Teachers rarely work with individuals; on the other hand they often interact with a whole group (a class) whose dynamics influence teachers' work. The contact between a teacher and a student is always mutual and does not imply mere knowledge and skills transfer to students. It includes a reciprocal influence and a relationship, two-way communication and joint work (Gillernová, 1998).

School interactions between students and teachers are always accompanied by various social phenomena, which are interconnected with communication. They are fundamental for social relationships development (even though we are mentioning them in a rather informative way) – these are conformity, facilitation, and conflicts. The conformity at school is a crucial social-psychological phenomenon because it makes a school function. Schools can be divided in accordance to their attitudes toward non-conformist teachers and students and their acceptance by school culture. Schools frequently seek an appropriate balance between creative individualism and the unnecessary conformist behaviour.

Social facilitation is both the qualitative and quantitative positive appreciation of one's achievement in the presence of other people. Social inhibition means a negative influence. Conflicts are natural phenomena at schools and also in the human world. An interpersonal conflict is usually a result of a differently perceived situation and/or a different interpretation of such a situation. The conflict is not a negative manifestation of interpersonal relationships. It can actually be a source of required changes (it fosters the development, initiates problem solution-seeking, evaluates relationships, and releases stress). Secondary schools represent social environments where teachers and students interact on a long-term basis. The participants of such school interactions frequently confront their opinion, attitudes, needs, interests, wishes, goals, and values. The problem is not how to exclude conflicts from school life but how to learn to cope with them efficiently. This can positively influence the interpersonal relationships within a group but also individual development of both teachers and their students (Gillernová, 1998).

School represents a distinguished socialization environment – its influences include teachers as well as peers. Different kinds of social learning have specific forms at school. Teachers' and peers' models have impact on imitative learning (including obser-

vation learning and anticipation learning); they offer the opportunity for identification. The learning of social conditioning is rather fundamental for teachers' educational approaches. Thus interpersonal relationships development within school environment provides opportunities to extend the efficiency of educational processes and emphasize the role of school as a socialization institution. School's socialization effect depends on its longitudinal, systematic and purposeful influence on students. The socialization in the course of academic development has specific features which include purposeful professional attitudes (e.g. teaching certain skills, knowledge and/or norms) but socialization stimuli within schools can also be rather unpremeditated. These two kinds of socialization stimuli can sometimes cause discrepancies which have a (positive or negative) impact on individual development of students. Teachers' participation in students' socialization is mainly professional; their approaches are institutional, formal, strictly defined by their roles. On the other hand, they influence the whole socialization process with their personality, their knowledge, skills, abilities and characteristic features. The roles of teachers and students are asymmetrical but complementary. Teachers are required to lead classroom activities, organize and direct students' activities and be responsible for them. The role of a student is also important – it is frequently the first social role they adapt. This role develops in the course of s school career and its meaning also changes. M. Vágnerová (2001) characterizes the student role as obligatory, formal, inferior, and with specific meaning for each student.

The relationships between teachers and students are both directly and implicitly influenced by the way they reflect their behaviour, their educational and social interactions. We conducted a research focused on secondary school students' perceptions of their teachers' educational styles. The results showed students' preference of positive relationship between teachers and students combined with a higher level of demands toward students. Students appreciated teachers' will to help, talk about students' problems, teachers' responsibility, fair attitudes toward individuals, their sense of humour, new ideas in classes, interesting lectures and the fact that teachers teach students lots of new knowledge. On the other hand, students criticized boring lectures, teachers' lack of interest in students and teaching, their inability to lead the class, chaos in the class, no humour during lectures, patronizing and authoritarian attitudes. They also viewed negatively when teachers did not care whether they understood their lectures (for more information – see Gillernová, 2007).

Peer group

Family, peer group and teachers represent crucial sources of social support during the adolescence period (e.g. Cotterell, 2007; Vágnerová, 2005; Wall; Novell; McIntyre, 1999). While family influence does not decrease – yet its form changes, the influence of teachers and peers increases. One of the key tasks of late adolescence requires becoming independent and autonomous. This step is sometimes strengthened by a transfer to a secondary school which is far from home and adolescents are forced to live in student houses. A complementary task to this one requires peer group participation and forming strong relationships with peers. Participation in a peer group and intimate friendships enable adolescents to adjust to new life conditions and further developmental tasks.

Building peer relationships means a developmental task (Zarrett – Eccless, 2006) but on the contrary peer relationships mediate the completion of other developmental tasks. J. J. Arnett (2009) views relationships among adolescents (especially friendships) as a bridge which leads from tight family relationships to future relationships with intimate partners. Peer groups offer adolescents a field to practice and acquire social and emotional skills and behavioural patterns necessary for further interpersonal relationships (Crosnoe, 2000; Vágnerová, 2005).

M. Vágnerová (2005) describes peer relationships in adolescence from the perspective of five fundamental psychological needs which were introduced by J. Langmeier and Z. Matějček (Matějček, 1992): As far as the need of stimuli and meaningful learning is concerned, peers represent a source of social learning and they serve as a reference group which influences adolescents' behaviour and emotions. The peer group also saturates the need of safety and confidence and it offers the opportunity to develop friendships while adolescents become independent on their family and parents. Even though we consider the peer group and its influences on a more general level, one of the indispensable outcomes of a peer group membership is friendship. Friendships in adolescence become more intimate and supporting, which differentiates them from childhood friendships. While children tend to play and have other common activities with their friends, adolescents need friends to share opinions, thoughts, hopes, secrets etc. (Arnett, 2009).

The need of identity is also fulfilled via peers, who also influence adolescents' self-perception and self-image (O'Koon, 1997). M Vágnerová (2005) states a need to have one's own rules and structure instead of the need of open future. Nevertheless, this is tightly connected with future life perspectives.

A class is one of the most naturally created peer groups where we can continuously build interpersonal relationships and also support further development of adolescents via these relationships. Thus secondary schools are often criticized for their strong emphasis on individualism and competition and minimal attention paid to natural adolescents' developmental trends in the course of their education (e.g. Cotterell, 2007; Eccles et al., 1993; Kozulin, 1998).

J. S. Eccles and her colleagues (1993) present a noteworthy approach to this question, which is based on the environment – stage fit theory, i.e. one's behaviour, motivation and mental health are influenced by the interaction between individual features and social environment which surrounds the person. The authors considered the match between adolescence and school environment. They emphasized the decrease of motivation, interest, achievement, and behavioural changes once there is a large gap between typical adolescents' needs and school's demands.

Their research showed a rather great discrepancy between adolescent development and educational process after the transfer to secondary schools. They described several unexpected phenomena when compared to previous educational levels. Schools' demands lead to a lower level of necessary cognitive capacity at time when cognitive functions are naturally developed and strengthened. Schools interrupt social networks at time when adolescents put greater emphasis on them. Students can hardly establish a stronger relationship with an adult authority outside the family at a life period when they require it as a developmental task (Eccles et al., 1993). Even though the research

was conducted in a different culture, it seems rather inspiring for the Czech educational system as well.

The peer group influences were also observed from the perspective of individual development and educational process. K. Wentzel, C. Barry-McNamara and K. Cladwell (2004) followed adolescents who did not succeed in becoming members of a peer group after their transition to secondary school. This situation had an impact on emotional development of the adolescents. They reported more stress and tension at school which lasted all the years they attended their secondary school (especially when they did not find any social group to belong to at any point of their study). This also affected their school achievements and possible dropout.

Motivation toward study, which traditionally decreases after the transition to secondary school, is also linked to a peer group (Cotterell, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2002; Pintrich, 2000; Ryan, 2001). Even though peers are often accused of negative influence, the research shows that the interest in learning can be influenced in both directions (Arnett, 2009; Ryan, 2001). Adolescents usually tend to find friends whose GPA is similar to theirs. If adolescents mingle with peer with higher achievements, their results in the first year of secondary school decreases less. If they have friends with poor results, their own achievements often drop under the average (Ryan, 2001). The individuals who differ from their peers in both described groups tend to adjust their GPAs to the majority of the group.

Another important impact of peer relationships development at schools is connected with social pathology prevention, especially bullying (Doll et al., 2004; Kyriacou, 2005; Orpinas – Horne, 2006; Pellegrini et al., 1999). As far as bullying is concerned, schools cannot rely on natural development in adolescence. It is highly advisable to support the development of healthy relationships, which do not accept hostile and threatening behaviour toward any member of a group.

The information above encourages secondary schools in at least two different ways. From developmental perspective – it shows the necessity to interconnect adolescents' needs and teaching skills and demands at secondary schools. It also emphasizes the need to support healthy relationships within adolescent peer groups as one of educational approaches. Thus schools ought to support social skills but they should also prevent the development of unhealthy relationships which can endanger their students and sometimes even cause school exclusion or dropout.

Research project

We conducted a social skills training with several first-year classes at different secondary school as a part of a larger research project entitled "The Model of Personal and Social Competences Development of Secondary School Students". The total study consisted of several parts. The aim of this stage was to describe acceptable and efficient approaches which support peer relationships development within standard educational settings. The researchers attempted to examine training methods which have positive impact on students' lives in their classes and on further relationships development either. The proved methods should currently be mediated to l teachers who could follow the work with students after the project finishes.

The project also attempted to draw closer attention of professionals to secondary school environment and state possible ways how to develop adolescents' social skills at schools. Secondary schools are currently expected to involve more complex educational approaches in their curriculum. However, teachers frequently doubt how to work with their students.

Objectives and procedure

We hypothesized that the continual work with students would develop and strengthen their interpersonal relationships in classes. This would also support their communication and cooperation and prevent undesirable behaviour such as bullying, intolerance, xenophobia.

The work with students lasted one school year and focused only on students of first years, which means newly formed social groups. Under such conditions we were able to follow the groups from their first encounter when classmates did not know each other and they started establishing a new social network within their classes.

The involved classes participated in social skills training, which started at the beginning of a school year in a form of the so called adaptation course and was followed by two-hour training sessions in the course of the whole school year. The interval between the sessions was approx. six weeks. Training activities were chosen in accordance to group development. They first focused on self-presentation and learning about new classmates and then continued with more specific activities on cooperation, discussion, and reflection of group life and development. The first activities also required less social cognitive abilities but the further ones demanded more self-reflection, group-reflection, and discussion about more specific topics.

The total project was conducted by two instructors who worked with all the classes and they were also in a close contact with their teachers and school counsellors. It was extremely desirable to keep the contact with schools at the time between the sessions and follow the development of each class.

The study brought various quantitative and qualitative data. The following text will introduce the qualitative results gained via observation and field notes. The data were further analyzed by professional software Atlas.ti, version 5.5.

After the training the participants were also given evaluation questionnaires and they reviewed the project. The questionnaires consisted of three questions indicated by symbols of a plus, a minus and a question mark. Students were thus asked what they appreciated, what they criticized and whether they had any unanswered questions.

Participants

The social skills training was conducted in six first-year classes at three different schools (i.e. the age of participants was 15–16 years). The total number of participants was 148 students. One class was at a comprehensive secondary school, three classes were at a special technical and administrative secondary school, and two classes were at a special industrial secondary school. There was a majority of girls in two classes in

the sample. Two classes were rather equally gender-mixed and in two classes there were mostly boys. The total number of girls in the sample was 91.

Results

The qualitative analysis detected several common features of interpersonal relationships development in classes in the course of the school year. On the contrary, it showed certain specific features of certain groups. The social skills which contribute to interpersonal relationships development were supported and improved in all the classes. Students started showing interest in their classmates and also in the life of their classes. They learned to reflect their behaviour, thoughts and emotions. They were able to think about the whole group and its characteristics. Even though the classes faced several conflict situations during the school year, they managed to cope with them and seek an efficient solution.

All the classes had students who differed from their classmates in the sense of their behaviour, communication, interests, features, appearance. Most of these students were identified at risk of becoming victims of bullying. Despite this fact none of the participating classes reported bullying. On the contrary, the "different" students were continuously accepted by their classmates. Most of them finally found friends and became members of a peer group.

The training offered the opportunity to students who were not verbally skilled. They were enabled to comment different situations in their classes which affected them. Once a class showed a tendency to exclude a student from their whole social group, the training created such atmosphere that these conditions were discussed in the class. There was only one class with a student with highly specific status. It was a boy of a different nationality and he protested against the school and the whole educational system. His relationships with his classmates were also rather complicated. It is noteworthy that the class learned to accept this boy. The students had several occasions to discuss his situation and status and many of them learned to understand him or even defended him against the others during discussions. We assume that continuous structuring of supportive and protective environment in the class enabled students to open such discussions. Even though the student did not change, his classmates found the way how to accept and tolerate him.

Another important topic which appeared on several occasions during the training sessions was a very strong need to talk about the life in the classes and seek acceptable ways how to coexist. The adolescents emphasized the amount of time spent with their classmates every day. They even stated they felt influenced by their school and class at times when they are not at school – e.g. while writing homework, learning to school or during their leisure time. The participants manifested their need to build healthy relationships in their classes, which they considered a crucial condition of their education at secondary school.

The peer relationships in all the classes were also influenced by their so called class teachers who students perceived as an important part of their social network. They viewed their teachers as an important factor of the group cohesion development and also as a source of help in conflict situations.

On the other hand, one class had a very specific status because their class teacher kept minimal contact with the students, she did not participate in the class life and she often criticized her students. The class faced several demanding situations during the school year – a group of male students sympathized with an extremist organizations, there were severe conflicts between two boys and the rest of the class, many petty conflicts and problems appeared every day. The mentioned topics were always discussed at the training sessions. The students got the opportunity to seek solutions and also view the problems from different perspectives. We can conclude that this class underwent the most outstanding development in the sense of peer relationships and their readiness to work and the ability to follow rules (during the training and in normal lectures either). The presence of adult leaders who structured the situation and prevented social pathology development at critical points apparently played a key role in the class development.

The evaluation questionnaires showed how precisely the adolescents were able to state their needs and benefits from the social skills training. Even though the questionnaire was anonymous, there were few negative comments which often criticized a low frequency of the sessions or conflicts during discussions (despite the fact that the instructors attempted to finish all discussions smoothly). The table no.1 shows some typical students' comments. It is noteworthy the adolescents were not said the goal of the project so precisely, these were only their remarks.

- ♣ *The training helped us to build closer relationships and not to be afraid to say one's opinions.*
- ♣ *We finally expressed the things which could destroy our class.*
- ♣ *I appreciated games we played because their aim was not to win.*
- ♣ *We talked about our problems.*
- ♣ *Everything got better, good cooperation.*
- ♣ *The atmosphere got better. The relationships got deeper.*
- ♣ *I liked the interest you showed us.*
- ♣ *One can say his/her opinions; it is possible to solve problems here which we wouldn't solve alone.*

Table 1 – students' quotations from questionnaires evaluating the whole social skills training at its end.

Considering the social skills training as a particular approach toward the development of healthy relationships in a class, we could observe three types of reactions to the training activities. Students' attitudes were undoubtedly linked with their cognitive characteristics and their interests. However, the training and its programme had to be adjusted to the observed differences. The largest group was represented by students whose GPA was on average or slightly below but their interest in relationships building and group cohesion support was eminent. Their motivation toward the training activities was high; they were able to regulate various activities and their benefits from the training were apparently high.

The second type of reaction was presented by a class whose GPA was rather low under average and their cognitive abilities seemed quite limited. Students of this

class tended to childish behaviour. The training activities had to be adjusted to their potentialities. Work with individual students had to be more differentiated because they were more diverse as far as their abilities and skills were concerned. Despite the limits and diversity adolescents showed certain development. On the contrary, it seems rather crucial that students learned to cooperate and discuss various problems and the training prevented social pathology development although the class was so diverse.

The last type of reaction appeared among comprehensive secondary school students who were most high-performance oriented and showed their academic ambitions. While working with these students we had to accept their motivation towards study and their great need to achieve high results at school. These tendencies slightly limited their interest in relationships development within the class. It is also noteworthy that these students did not show such approach at the beginning of the school year. It apparently appeared under the school atmosphere pressure.

Limits and conclusions

The experience gained in the course of social skills training in newly formed secondary school classes proved the necessity to support healthy relationships development. The training enabled the students to communicate with all their classmates and offered them the opportunity to experience interactions with their classmates in different situations. The relationships in classes were supported from their beginning. The students also learned to accept their classmates who seemed rather different from them. Students who faced troubles to engage in peer relationships or who showed different features had a continuous opportunity to establish their status in the class and they finally found friends.

Purposeful work with adolescents prevented social pathology developments. However, it would be difficult to estimate the development of the classes without the training implementation. It seems highly beneficial when adolescents get the opportunity to develop their peer relationships within their classes because they spend a large amount of time with their classmates every day. If the work was more intensified via teachers who would implement parts of the training into standard teaching, the development of adolescents would probably be much more accelerated. If this kind of work was included into regular educational process, the development of adolescents' social skills and also cognitive abilities would be apparently much more extensive. The training as a form of social pathology prevention seems efficient in the total course of adolescents' secondary schools study – especially if it was continuously conducted by school counsellors, school psychologists or even teachers. Under such conditions classes of adolescents students are likely to need still less external leadership by adult authorities. They would probably learn how to modulate critical situations in the class and they would be able to express the need for help if necessary.

On the other hand, the work with classes showed the fundamental role of an adult who students can rely on and who helps them to solve problematic situations in their groups. Each class consisted of nearly thirty students and we cannot expect the adolescents will be able to develop healthy relationships and group cohesion without external support in such a large social group.

ROZVÍJENÍ „ZDRAVÝCH" INTERPERSONÁLNÍCH VZTAHŮ VE STŘEDNÍ ŠKOLE Z POHLEDU DOSPÍVAJÍCÍCH STUDENTŮ

Abstrakt: Příspěvek poukazuje na nutnost rozvoje zdravých interpersonálních vztahů mezi dospívajícími v prostředí středních škol. Význam vrstevnických vztahů je nahlížen z několika různých hledisek s ohledem na sociálně psychologické charakteristiky adolescence a rovněž prevenci sociálně patologických jevů. Dále je představen projekt, při němž byly využity metody sociálně psychologického výcviku jako formy podpory a rozvoje dospívajících v prvních ročnících středoškolského studia. Získaná data byla kvalitativně zpracována a přinesla množství pozoruhodných informací, které potvrzují skutečnost, že rozvoj sociálních dovedností dospívajících a jejich vzájemných vztahů by měl být plnohodnotnou součástí edukačního procesu.

Klíčová slova: adolescenti, vrstevnická skupina, mezilidské vztahy, sociálně psychologický výcvik, střední školy