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A DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LEARNER AND THE TEACHER IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Successful dynamic relationships between the learner and the teacher provide the basis for quality learning and teaching. This paper discusses the tangible factors which contribute to quality relationships, the theoretical observations noted in a dynamic relationship in the context of the early years setting and its general applicability to other educational contexts.

An effective learning environment in the classroom calls for an effective teacher who possesses the following competencies such as a correct professional attitude, adequate skills and relevant knowledge. A high quality relationship between the learner and the teacher necessitates a teacher who is able to communicate easily and effectively and to establish and maintain a constructive bonding with children, colleagues and parents. He is in addition sensitive to the psychological dimension of interaction within and outside the classroom.

Successful relationships and especially dynamic ones are clearly crucial to successful education yet relatively little has been written on this aspect. The quality of a dynamic classroom relationship is important in facilitating learning and in providing both teacher and learner with a sense of self-fulfilment and as the basis for a positive, but meaningfully disciplined working atmosphere. Because relationships are the product of such very complex and subtle personal interaction between the teachers and learners, it is very hard to analyse these relationships and to put them down on writing. However, it is necessary to try to ascertain the more tangible factors which contribute to quality relationships in order to clarify for us how we can strive to attain them in our classroom.

Marsh (1994) noted a set of criteria as basic in creating a warm person-centered relationship to be established in early childhood education. These include familiarity, responsiveness, attachment as well as acceptance, genuineness and empathy. The teacher has a genuine acceptance of children as they are and to be able to view situations from their perspective. Observations made of adults working with children, and interviews with parents and discussions with teachers, showed that effective relationships could be analysed in terms of four distinct yet interrelated categories of practice. These are:

- relationships between teachers and parents
- relationships between teachers and learners
- team work and ethos and
- management, leadership and organisation.

In order to assess the effectiveness and quality of relationships in an individual classroom, some sort of framework is necessary. Marsh has compiled a quality framework in an attempt to provide an initial structure for practitioners to consider, adapt and alter to fit their own needs for their particular setting. The following is extracted from a longer list as those pertaining to relationships in the classroom for primary schools.

Relationships with learners in the classroom*General*

- How is acceptable behaviour reinforced and rewarded?
- How is inappropriate behaviour dealt with?
- Is this consistent between educators?
- How are children encouraged to develop a positive self image?
- Do children have opportunities to work alone? In pairs? In groups?
- Are cooperative activities encouraged and planned for?
- What measures are taken to make meal time an enjoyable social occasion?
- How are children's individual needs and abilities catered for?
- Do all teachers participate effectively in the children's activities?

Interactions

- Is there evidence that the teacher, when interacting with a learner:
- Gives the learner time to listen and respond?
- Values learners' contributions and provides positive comments and praise?
- Does not attempt to force a response if the child is not yet secure enough?
- Provides a friendly commentary on the activity?
- Asks open-ended questions?
- Listens responsively and attentively?
- Provides supportive body language and gestures?
- Possesses a high degree of awareness of what is going on and regularly
- reviews the extent to which children are involved in their tasks?
- Keeps children informed of events and changes which are going to take place?

Learners' relationships with teachers

- Do learners approach teachers confidently?
- Do learners seek teacher participation?
- Do learners demonstrate a degree of independence?

Learners' relationships with their peers

Is there evidence that:

- They usually treat each other with respect?
- They are supportive of each other and each other's contributions in work and play?
- They share and take turns reasonably often, allowing for their emotional and developmental levels?
- They respond positively to most other children and adults most of the time?
- They exhibit enthusiasm and positive attitudes most of the time?
- They have some degree of choice over their playmates and the activities and the activities which they undertake?

- They enjoy coming to school and being there?

Research (Tinzmann et al 1990) has indicated that successful learning in the classroom involves an interaction of the learner, the materials, the teacher and the context. A new vision of today's learners identifies them as knowledgeable, self-determined, strategic and empathetic THINKERS. In applying this research, the new guidelines in most content areas would stress thinking in their curriculum. There is a dual agenda of content and process for all students and the thinking curriculum would be characterised by in-depth learning, involving students in real-world, relevant tasks, by engaging students in holistic tasks from kindergarten through secondary school and utilizing student's prior knowledge.

In this context, effective communication and collaboration among teachers and students are essential to enhance successful learning. It is through interaction and dialogue that curriculum objectives become alive. This focus on the collective knowledge and thinking of the group changes the roles of students and teachers and the way they interact and relate to each other in the classroom. According to Tinzmann (1990) collaborative classrooms seem to have four general characteristics. The first two capture changing relationships between teachers and students. The third characterizes teachers' new approaches to instruction and the fourth addresses the composition of a collaborative classroom.

- Shared Knowledge among Teachers and Students
- Shared Authority among Teachers and Students
- Teachers as Mediators
- Heterogeneous groupings of students.

These characteristics necessitate new roles for teachers and students that lead to interactions different from those in more traditional classrooms. The third characteristic – teachers as mediators is so important it is to be elaborated further.

Teachers as Mediators

Teachers are nowadays defining their roles in terms of mediating learning through dialogue and collaboration. Tinzmann et al (1990) define mediation as facilitating, modeling and coaching and most teachers practise them from time to time. These behaviours drive instruction in collaborative classrooms and have specific purposes in collaborative contexts. Mediation is defined differently by Reuven Feuerstein (1980), Lev Vygotsky (1930) and Carl Haywood (1990). It was Vygotsky who developed mediation as a way to assist learners in developing cognitive processes and Feuerstein extends this work to a broad cultural setting and considers what can be done to help people overcome common impediments to learning. Carl Haywood works to help teachers mediate young children's learning through the Bright Start program based on Feuerstein's Mediated Learning Experience (MLE).

Mediated learning is a dynamic process by which a mediator (eg teacher) organises and interprets the world to a child. When an individual gives meaning to events, helps children select relevant from irrelevant variables, assists in abstracting rules for regularly occurring phenomena, and generally attempts to develop children's ability to think, that individual is engaged in mediated learning. The theory of mediated learning experience is comprehensive and complex, and consequently it has proven difficult to understand and apply for those the fields of psychology and special education. However, there have been instances of successful applications in a number of classroom contexts.

Feuerstein (1980) maintains that many classroom problems in learning are the result of insufficient or inadequate mediated learning experience (MLE). He has developed a program, Instrumental Enrichment, to provide MLE in a systematic way in the classroom. The general goal of the program is to teach children prerequisites of thinking and learning so that they will learn how to learn and be better able to adapt and adjust to ever changing life conditions.

MLE describes the nature of the interpersonal interaction which occurs whenever there exists a conscious, directed effort to influence learning and behaviour as in the classroom. It is a natural and inherent part of teacher/student interactions and its consequence is to heighten, deepen, and intensify the interpersonal experience and cause structural changes in the mediatee (student). The criteria of the MLE interaction in the classroom are listed as follows:

- Intentionality and Reciprocity
- Meaning
- Transcendence
- Competence
- Self-Regulation and Control of Behaviour
- Sharing
- Individuation
- Goal Planning
- Challenge
- Self-Change

All the criteria of MLE are interlinked and it is up to the creativity, flexibility and insightfulness of the teacher to respond to the learner in ways which exploit the mediational potential of the interaction or dynamic relationship. MLE as a theory and as an operational system, allows us to understand human plasticity and modifiability. It serves as a powerful guide in shaping the interaction of the growing human being in a way that will permit him to increase his modifiability wherever this has not developed owing to a lack of MLE.

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