

IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE PEDAGOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF NOWADAY`S TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The current situation in the sphere of education outlines the need for changes that can be seen as a continuous quality improvement process in the sphere of teacher education. The context emphasizes pedagogical relationships that are viewed as a key element penetrating the whole process of education. However, the competence models focus more on different sets of competences, but those necessary for the development of pedagogical relationships remain unclear. Therefore the following research questions have been put forward: 1) What is the correlation between pedagogical relationships oriented towards the personality and university teachers as social role models for student teachers? 2) What is the correlation between pedagogical relationships oriented towards the personality and self-evaluation of the effectiveness of mastering the content of study courses?

The article reflects the research study that involves Bachelor and Master level students at Liepaja University, who were separated in 3 groups according to the respondents' pedagogical experience and the following criterions: 1) a level of study experience and 2) personal involvement into the development of pedagogical relationships. The results were collected by Likert-type questionnaire and analysed with SPSS Statistics 17.0 using a cross-tabulation and a Pearson's chi-square test. The totality of the research data confirm that exactly the skills of university teachers to create positive personal relationships with the students can be regarded as a precondition for achieving desirable study outcomes and a determinant factor of their competitiveness.

Keywords: Pedagogical relationships, university teachers, teacher education

Introduction

Current situation in the field of education has been influenced by the tendencies of today`s global world characterized by postmodernism, constructivism as well as democratic and humanistic approach to pedagogy. A postmodern perspective challenges uncertainty, diversity and multiplicity that can be fragmenting and depowering as well as energizing and powerful. According to Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007), relationships, connectedness and interdependence are the constants that hold us together in such a fragmented world. The context outlines the need for changes and paradigm shift in education that can be seen as a continuous process of looking for the possibilities to improve the quality of teaching and teacher education, which has been identified as the most important factor influencing the quality of education. Moreover, university teachers are intended to be less a source of answers than a resource for learning and act as role models for student teachers, who acquire the competences that they deploy later in the classroom (Report of a Peer Learning Activity, 2010; Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000). The context demands changes

in the understanding of pedagogical relationships as well – they are viewed as a key element penetrating the whole process of lifelong education and existing as a common denominator between the process of education and professional performance, where especial role has been allocated to professional competence of teachers. However, the research studies focus more on the content of teacher education, outcomes and competences in general, but hardly on the significance of pedagogical relationships as one of the main aspects reflecting the professionalism of university teachers. This contradiction has been confirmed by majority of competence models that highlight different sets of competences, but those necessary for the development of pedagogical relationships remain unclear. Therefore the following **research questions** have been put forward:

Research Question 1: What is the correlation between pedagogical relationships oriented towards the personality and university teachers as social role models for student teachers?

Research Question 2: What is the correlation between pedagogical relationships oriented towards the personality and self-evaluation of the effectiveness of mastering the content of study courses?

Pedagogical relationships as a key element in university teachers' professional competence

The basic goal of humanistic education is to develop the potentials of a person - open to change, continued learning and striving for self-actualization, who is able to live in society as a fully-functioning individual. However, when entering university, students often revert to classroom strategies that worked for them in high school, generally trying to do “what the teacher wants”, thus seeking to improve their job performance yet denying themselves the practice it takes to develop the new skills. Becoming an effective teacher may involve changing personal theories about teaching and learning, as well as unlearning established ideas. Whether learners change their conceptions is strongly influenced by educators' conceptions (Brooks, 2005; Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000).

The social role of a teacher in a humanistic setting is that of facilitator, helper, and partner, who trusts students to assume responsibility for their learning and respect and utilize the experiences and potentialities of students, in order to create a cooperative, supportive learning environment. Therefore the quality of pedagogical relationships between a teacher and a student considered as the foundation of teaching and learning that happens in the classroom is of great significance. Through these relationships teachers attend to the affective, emotional and intellectual dimensions of a learner in an educational setting (Elias & Merriam, 1984). Congruency, empathy, compassion and acceptance have been considered as the main preconditions of quality in pedagogical relationships revealing in the process of positive and collaborative interaction, respect, responsibility, and facilitation of learning on both sides (Axline, 1993; Pädagogischer Bezug, n.d.). The value of pedagogical relationships lies in attitudes and understandings that the educator employs in the educational context.

However, analysing the models explaining the concept of teachers' professionalism, the aspect of pedagogical relationships has often been neglected or conceptualized very indefinitely. Among the qualities essential to the teacher profession there have been mentioned a strong academic and practical knowledge base, practice-based research, ethical codes, lifelong professional development, professional autonomy and control of one's own work, as well as collaboration with colleagues and stakeholders (Snoek, Swennen, & Van Der Klink, 2011). Although the research findings suggest to consider the ability to plan, access, differentiate, communicate effectively, use questions skilfully and manage behaviour as some of the core professional skills that point to the quality of teachers, the interplay of people involved in the learning setting has been less often addressed (Brooks, 2005; Merriam &

Caffarella, 1991). Also the constructivist point of view supports the idea of learning as a cognitive process of meaning-making that depends on an individual mental activity, inner motivation and a socially interactive interchange. Aspects of constructivism can be found in self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, situated cognition, and reflective practice (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Reich, 2002).

Snoek, Swennen, & Van Der Klink (2010) have outlined some general characteristics of the concept „professionalism” referring to the aspects of the quality of teacher education and turning attention towards the importance of pedagogical relationships: 1) quality improvement and output requirements, 2) movement towards new forms of relationships and collaboration, 3) accountability – how the intended learning outcomes have been achieved, 4) improvement and innovation, 5) the nature of the knowledge base, which can also be the result of experience and reflection, 6) professional development, 7) implementation of standards describing competencies and qualifications. Moreover, Snoek, Swennen, & Van Der Klink (2010) believe that the quality of teachers has a larger impact on the learning of students than the quality of the curriculum, the teaching methods, the school building or the role of parents. By modelling effective teaching strategies, university teachers potentially play a key role both in maintaining and in improving the quality of the education system through their impact on student teachers and through their role as developers and mediators of knowledge about education, and as educational innovators (Report of a Peer Learning Activity, 2010). Accordingly the issue of the professionalism of university teachers and pedagogical relationships as its key element is becoming an issue of paramount importance.

Research procedure and design Participants

The article reflects the research study that involves Liepaja University students (N = 1267), who represent Bachelor and Master level study programmes in the sphere of education. In order to compare the attitudes of respondents, there were separated several groups of students (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Groups of Respondents

Groups	Study level/year	N	% (of total amount)
A	Bachelor level/ study year 1 - 2	584	46.1
B	Bachelor level/ study year 3 - 4	556	43.9
C	Master level/ study year 1-2	127	10.0

For the research purpose the grouping of the respondents complies with two criterions. Firstly, it is a level of study experience that ensures diverse opportunities for evaluation of the input of university teachers into the development of pedagogical relationships. Secondly, it is personal involvement of respondents into the development of pedagogical relationships. It has to be noted that in the beginning of the study process students have only acquired basic theoretical knowledge necessary for pedagogical work (Group A), whereas in the further study process students have got involved in active implementation of pedagogical practice programmes (Group B). Respectively, in many cases Master level students have already acquired teacher qualification and during research practice give more attention to the studies of pedagogical relationships in different educational institutions (Group C).

Method

The research data reflected in the publication were collected during the years 2009 – 2013. The implementation of the research was ensured by a standardised evaluation

procedure of university teachers' professional competence that corresponds with the demands of the Quality Management System existing at Liepaja University. The procedure is implemented every semester – twice in a study year, in accordance with the evaluation schedule of the teaching staff prepared beforehand. In the practice of the higher educational institution the results of the evaluation have been analysed in the frame of one semester.

The research work reflected in the article summarizes the results of a questionnaire acquired during nine repeated measurements, where professional performance of the teaching staff (N = 39) in a context of different study courses is subjected to evaluation. Respectively, 14 members of the teaching staff were evaluated twice, but 6 members – 3 times. At the same time the research work turns attention not to the professional competence and performance of autonomous university teaching staff and implementation of particular study courses, but towards mutual correlations.

The standardized questionnaire consists of 19 questions containing indicators that are not systemically equal to any of the university teachers' competence models analysed before. However, in the structure of the research instrument it is possible to separate several thematically connected groups of questions:

Teaching as dynamic and innovative profession and teachers as reflective practitioners - reflected by the questions in connection with autonomy of study courses, skills of the teaching staff to reveal the content qualitatively and quantitatively, availability and usefulness of suggested readings, as well as assessments conducted to gain detailed insights into the learning outcomes.

Professional development throughout the career, included in the questions revealing the presence of newest scientific findings in the study course programme, as well as using study methods and technologies relevant to the content of the study course.

The implementation of standards describing competencies and qualifications of the profession, revealed by the questions oriented towards the formulation of the students' evaluation criterions and organization of teaching activities.

Movement away from the traditional professional authority and autonomy towards new forms of relationships and collaboration, including questions about the teaching staff ability to evoke interest in the study course and develop positive relationships with the students.

The research work is oriented towards the fourth group of questions reflecting positive pedagogical relationships, which has been revealed with comparatively insignificant proportion of questions. Respectively two questions allow obtaining information about the desire of respondents to attend more study courses taught by the same teacher.

According to the research questions put forward in the article, the correlation has been determined between the attitude expressed by the respondents in relation with their wish to attend more study courses taught by the same teacher (Q18), as well as with the evaluation of the study course level of difficulty (Q19) and the indicators of pedagogical relationships implemented by university teachers: skills and ability to evoke interest in the study course (Q6), favourable teacher's attitude towards students (Q15) and a good contact with audience (Q16).

In order to measure the attitude of respondents, the structure of the questionnaire offers Likert-type response questions with five possible degrees of agreement: 1 - strongly agree, 2 – rather agree, 3 – rather disagree, 4 - strongly disagree, 5 – cannot say. Cronbach's alpha is 0.815, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for the items in the questionnaire used in the research. The results were analysed with SPSS Statistics 17.0 using a cross-tabulation and a Pearson's chi-square test.

Results

The results for the three groups were statistically significant and demonstrated relationships between the variables (see Table 2).

Table 2. Pearson's Chi-square test results for groups A, B and C.

	Group A	Group B	Group C
Q6	$X^2(25, N=584) = 334.9,$ $p < .001$	$X^2(20, N=556) = 413.89,$ $p < .001$	$X^2(20, N=127) = 413.89,$ $p < .001$
Q15	$X^2(25, N=584) = 398,$ $p < .001$	$X^2(20, N=556) = 314.04,$ $p < .001$	$X^2(20, N=127) = 314.04,$ $p < .001$
Q16	$X^2(25, N=584) = 502.99,$ $p < .001$	$X^2(25, N=556) = 404.80,$ $p < .001$	$X^2(25, N=127) = 404.8,$ $p < .001$

The correlation between the students, who are less experienced in the study process and pedagogical practice (Group A) and their readiness to continue collaboration with the university teacher and his/her skills to collaborate with audience has been reflected in the Table 3.

Table 3. Group A.

N=584		6q1	15q1	16q1	6q2	15q2	16q2	6q3	15q3	16q3	6q4	15q4	16q4	6q5	15q5	16q5
I would attend other courses taught by this lecturer	1 Count	243	296	292	68	16	24	3	3	0	0	0	0	2	1	0
	2 Count	60	122	102	95	49	70	15	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	3 Count	1	21	13	17	23	26	30	6	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
	4 Count	1	1	0	3	4	5	5	1	3	1	3	3	0	1	0
	5 Count	6	16	14	12	9	11	8	2	0	1	1	0	2	1	1

The data obtained from the respondents of the Group A confirm statistically significant correlation observed between the expressed desires of the respondents to collaborate with university teachers in cases if there exist a high level of pedagogical relationships. In this connection 243 respondents (41,6%) have expressed strong agreement to the fact that the university teacher evoked interest in the corresponding course of study. Respectively 96 respondents (50,7%) have presented strong agreement that the teachers attitude towards the students was favourable. In its turn, 292 respondents (50%) have expressed strong agreement to continue collaboration with the teacher, because he/she had good contact with the audience.

Analysing the correlation between the difficulty level of the study course, it was found that 219 respondents of the Group A (37,5%) evaluated it as appropriate, because the teacher evoked interest in the study course. Correspondingly 300 respondents (51,4%) have evaluated the difficulty level of the study course as suitable, because the teacher's attitude towards the students was favourable. The responses of 279 respondents (47,8%) have acknowledged the correlation between a sufficient level of the study course acquisition and a good contact of the teacher with the audience.

The correlation between the students, who are experienced both in the study process and pedagogical practice (Group B) and their readiness to continue collaboration with the university teacher and his/her skills to collaborate with audience has been reflected in the Table 4.

Table 4. Group B.

N=556		6q1	15q1	16q1	6q2	15q2	16q2	6q3	15q3	16q3	6q4	15q4	16q4	6q5	15q5	16q5
I would attend other courses taught by this lecturer	1 Count	220	270	265	55	8	15	3	2	1	0	1	0	3	0	0
	2 Count	35	112	82	102	39	66	19	7	12	3	1	0	1	1	0
	3 Count	1	11	6	27	34	35	23	6	11	2	4	2	2	0	1
	4 Count	1	3	0	5	8	8	13	9	11	8	7	8	2	2	1
	5 Count	2	13	9	9	10	10	8	2	4	2	1	2	6	1	2

The data analysis indicates a comparatively high proportion – 220 respondents (39,6%), who have strongly agreed to continue collaboration with the teacher, as he/she evoked interest in the study course. Correspondingly 270 respondents (48,6%) have expressed a strong agreement for continuing the collaboration, as the teacher had favourable attitude towards the students. 265 respondents of the Group B (47,7%) strongly agree to continue the collaboration, as the teacher had a good contact with the audience.

Analysing the correlation between the difficulty level of the study course, it can be observed that 200 respondents of the Group B (36,0%) have evaluated it as appropriate, because the teacher evoked interest in the study course. Correspondingly 306 respondents (55,0%) have evaluated the difficulty level of the study course as suitable, because of a favourable teacher's attitude towards the students. The answers of 280 respondents (50,4%) have confirmed the correlation between a sufficient level of the study course acquisition and a good contact of the teacher with the audience.

The correlation between the Master level students (Group C) and their readiness to continue collaboration with the university teacher and his/her skills to collaborate with audience has been reflected in the Table 5.

Table 5. Group C.

N=127		6q1	15q1	16q1	6q2	15q2	16q2	6q3	15q3	16q3	6q4	15q4	16q4	6q5	15q5	16q5
I would attend other courses taught by this lecturer	1 Count	80	87	84	8	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2 Count	10	20	17	14	5	7	1	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	1
	3 Count	0	1	0	1	3	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	4 Count	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	3	3	2	2	0	2	0
	5 Count	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The data analysis of the Group C also indicates a high proportion – 80 respondents (63,0%), who strongly agree to continue collaboration with the teacher, because he/she has evoked interest in the study course. Correspondingly 87 respondents (69%) have expressed strong agreement for continuing the collaboration, because of the teacher's favourable attitude towards the students. 84 respondents of the Group C (66,1%) strongly agree to continue collaboration, as the teacher had a good contact with the audience.

Analysing the correlation between the difficulty level of the study course, it can be noticed that 69 respondents of the Group C (54,3%) have evaluated it as appropriate, as the teacher evoked interest in the study course. Respectively 84 respondents (66,1%) have evaluated the difficulty level of the study course as suitable, because the teacher's attitude towards the students was favourable. In their turn, 79 respondents (62,2%) have demonstrated the correlation between a sufficient level of the study course acquisition and a good contact of the teacher with the audience.

Discussion

Teachers' skills and abilities to develop positive pedagogical relationships with students are among the most significant dimensions of professional competence that has been confirmed by scientific research and studies of good practice. Characterizing the totality of these skills and abilities in general, teachers have to be able to direct their activity in accordance with students' activity and needs, joining into constantly changeable interaction, thus influencing purposefully the process of study and development of their students. At the same time communication, action and interpersonal relationships have to be ensured according to the expectations and individual opportunities of the students. In compliance with the notions of H. Dauber (2005) acquired during long-term pedagogical praxis, teachers have to develop and express true interest in their students, avoiding the conviction that everything is known and predictable (Dauber, 2005). The practical meaning of this approach has been confirmed by scientific research carried out at the end of 20th and in the beginning of 21st

century. One of the most significant conclusions suggest that trustworthy relationships between educatees and teachers motivate students and develop positive attitude towards the process of study and attaches positive life quality indicators to the activity in an educational institution (Wild, 2002).

These conditions can be regarded as topical for the segments of preschool and school education. However, a student, who has entered a higher educational establishment, is a grown up adult – an autonomous personality, who should be aware of his/her future profession acquirement. Therefore more formal relationships between teaching staff and students would be acceptable, bringing forward the content of a study course, the methodology of its implementation and evaluation of students` knowledge. However, the research study reflected in the article demonstrates the opposite – the data certify that university teachers` skills to promote interest in the study course are not so relevant for students` motivation to continue further collaboration. In this context a favourable teacher`s attitude towards students and a good contact with audience become as much more important indicator (see Tables 3, 4, 5).

The findings discover the tendency that less experienced students try to identify the university teachers with their former teachers at schools, whereas experienced students compare the university teachers` skills and abilities to develop pedagogical relationships with the personal competence in this area. The totality of the data obtained during the research confirm that exactly the skills of university teachers to create positive personal relationships with every student and students audience in general, in any case is a precondition of their competitiveness.

The data of the research certify the significance of university teachers` competence in development of pedagogical relationships in connection with the difficulty level of the study course. Learning process has been viewed as a challenge on every educational level and achievements in individual and career development are only possible if the content of studies contain new information and innovative viewpoints. A significant factor for ensuring such study process is the methodological competence of teacher educators. However, the summarized research data certify that the difficulty level and its suitability for the study course to a great extent is directly connected with university teachers` positive attitude towards students and skills to create a good contact with audience. That leads to a cognition that exactly these skills can be regarded as a precondition for achieving desirable study outcomes, and teaching staff should have to actualize their skills and knowledge about pedagogical relationships development. Greater attention should be paid to this topic, for example, in the implementation of university didactics study programmes within the process of continuing education, as well as a differential approach to students and formation of groups with diverse study experience should also be examined in this context.

Paradoxically that the group of Master level students demonstrates statistically significant data certifying the tendency to evaluate university teachers in relation with their skills to collaborate with the students` audience (see Table 5). It has to be mentioned that the legal normative documents foresee less amount of contact hours for Master level students in comparison with Bachelor level, thus anticipating greater amount of time for independent studies. However, the totality of research data acknowledge the significance of positive pedagogical relationships between the teaching staff and the students, that is of greater importance particularly in Master level study programmes.

The findings make to consider the nowadays tendencies in the sphere of higher education and put forward **the questions for further research**. For example, the developmental strategy of the University, where the research was conducted, determines wider implementation of e-studies. This challenge also applies to the pedagogical study programmes of different level. Although the usefulness of modern technologies cannot be

questioned, the findings on implementation of pedagogical relationships and their kinds of expression should be taken into consideration when providing detached e-study process.

Students` expectations, motivation and achievements influence their study process and facilitate higher study outcomes. Positive interpersonal relationships oriented towards collaboration to a great extent ensure the effectiveness of the study process. However, the research data reflect the perspective of only one group representatives – the students.

Therefore a multiperspective approach should be used in further research studies allowing evaluating the attitude of university teachers towards the essence of pedagogical relationships and significance in the frame of the study process in a higher educational institution.

The research study has evoked reflections about the necessity to improve the questionnaire. Although the instrument used during the research is valid, several changes should be introduced in its form and content. Firstly, taking into consideration the significance of the problem, the content of the questionnaire should include more questions related to the thematic of pedagogical relationships. At the same time the structure of the questionnaire should allow adding comments of respondents. This would allow clarifying the particular characteristics reflecting students` understanding about the statements like “good attitude towards students” or “good contact with audience”. This kind of data is necessary both in a short term teaching staff evaluation and in a study of mutual coherence in this area.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from the answers to the research questions, the following conclusions can be drawn:

The issue of the professionalism of university teachers and their skills to create positive pedagogical relationships as its key element becomes essential in the educational context. This condition is topical in teacher education, as university teachers are social role models for student teachers attending to the affective, emotional and intellectual dimensions of a learner in an educational setting. The value of pedagogical relationships lies in attitudes and understandings that the educator employs in the study process.

Existing teachers` competence models highlight different sets of competences focussing on the content and outcomes of teacher education, however, often neglecting the significance of pedagogical relationships.

The findings certify that university teachers` skills to promote interest in the study course are not so relevant for students` motivation to continue further collaboration. A favourable teacher`s attitude towards students and a good contact with audience have been recognized as more important indicators in this context and are directly connected with the difficulty level of the study course and its suitability.

The research shows statistically significant correlation between pedagogical relationships oriented towards the personality and university teachers as social role models for student teachers, as well as self-evaluation of the effectiveness of mastering the content of study courses. The findings reveal the tendency that less experienced students try to identify the university teachers with their former teachers at schools, whereas experienced students compare the university teachers` skills to develop pedagogical relationships with the personal competence in this area.

The totality of the research data confirm that exactly the skills of university teachers to create positive personal relationships with the students can be regarded as a precondition for achieving desirable study outcomes and a determinant factor of their competitiveness.

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