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Online learning of socio-emotional behaviors in primary education during the COVID 19 pandemic. Case study

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Abstract. In this paper we will analyze the characteristics of socio-emotional behaviors of primary school students in online learning conditions, the psycho-educational needs of students and socio-emotional learning, as well as a number of educational intervention strategies (positive teaching, positive discipline, assertive discipline).

Keywords. socio-emotional behaviors, educational intervention strategies, primary school

1. The need for cognitive-behavioral interventions in classroom management

Children’s life success depends not only on their cognitive capacities, knowledge and abilities acquired in school, but mostly on their emotional development and their capacity to build social relationships with others.

After 1990, once the student-centered learning concepts, learning through cooperation, active learning and self-control were introduced, teachers have also started to develop new classroom management strategies based on a good knowledge of pupils, their motivation, trust and mutual respect.

Class management can be defined as “the field of research in educational sciences which study both the theoretical approaches of the class and its practical - dimensional structures (ergonomical, psychological, psycho-social, regulatory, relational, operational and creative), in order to facilitate teachers’ interventions in concrete educational situations, through the educational micro-decision exercise”. (Potolea, D., Neacșu, I., Iucu, R. B., Pânișoară, I. – O., coord.2008)

A more brief description of class management could be “the best strategic direction of the educational activity, designed and carried out in an educational facility / classroom”. (Iucu, B.R., 2006).

Classroom management requires the teacher’s ability to organize and plan the activities of a classroom to ensure a learning-friendly environment, while preventing undesirable behaviors and solving behavioral problems. (Băban, A. 2001).

The principles of class management are summarized by Băban (2001) as follows:

- ❖ ”improving learning conditions
- ❖ preventing stress from teachers and students

- ❖ increasing the time spent on learning task rather than controlling disruptive behaviors
- ❖ respecting the rules, understanding and accepting them by students
- ❖ involving the students in activities that require their active participation.”

The class management has a multidimensional character. Its dimensions are:

- the ergonomic dimension (classroom furniture layout, classroom wall displays, educational materials, good visibility)
- the psychological dimension (aspects of student personality, individual characteristics, students learning capacities)
- the regulatory dimension (the applied system of rules)
- the social dimension (number of students in a class, group cohesion, types of leaders)
- the operational dimension (teacher’s intervention strategies)
- the innovative dimension (teacher’s creativity in decision-making).

Faulty management leads to fatigue, routine and boredom, overloading and stress, lack of motivation and disappearance of expected results.

In-class behavioral management includes the following action strategies:

- the appreciation and evaluation of personal effort by stimulating collaboration and avoiding competition
- the analysis, taking into account the students view and negotiate the rules
- the identification of personal skills
- setting realistic targets and supporting the students in achieving them
- providing real, well formulated feedback
- promoting tolerance and mutual respect
- strengthening positive behavior
- offering alternatives to disruptive behaviors.

By using cognitive-behavioral methods and techniques that address thoughts and emotions, we can turn student behavior from undesirable to desirable and teach them methods of self-control and self-regulation.

Starting from March 2020, the Romanian educational system faced a different challenge. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and universities were closed and all didactic efforts were moved toward the online environment, in an unprecedented effort to ensure the educational continuity (Nedelcu, 2020).

In a research made in 2020, Sălceanu C. describes emotional status of the students during this isolation period, related to conducting the educational activity in the online environment: “50% of students feel happy and at ease, 37.5% feel fearful and afraid, and 12.5% of participants feel sad”.

2. The primary teacher as class manager

The primary teacher is the leader of the instructional and educational activity of a classroom. It must act simultaneously on two fronts: on one hand, it must meet the objectives set out in the school documents and, on the other, it must shape the students' personalities and build up the group.

According to Nicola (2003), the teacher thus fulfills several roles:

- decision-making, as an expert of teaching – learning - evaluation
- motivating agent (wakeup and maintain student motivation)
- leader (leads, influences and motivates the class)
- an adviser (guides, advises both students, as well as parents or other teachers who interact with their class)

- model (is a model to follow for pupils)
- reflective (reflects on the teaching aspects and events they face)
- managerial (leads the entire activity).

Marzano (2003) describes the following „specific role types:

- develop positive relations between students,
- implement learning optimization strategies,
- motivate the students by using group management techniques,
- stimulate social skills,
- use of interventional methods when negative behavior occurs.”

3. The psycho-educational needs of students and socio-emotional learning

Starting from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, every child wants to satisfy a need, which can be of attention, of recognition (of merit) or of security. Depending of the reaction, the reinforcing feedback (positive or negative) received, the child will repeat or maintain the same behavior. Punishing or sanctioning the student will not cause a change of behavior because it treats effect and not the cause. Only learning a positive alternative behavior is really a way of changing unwanted behavior.

Teachers get burned out due to the pressures of standardized testing, lack of time to plan and teach, overloaded classrooms, and student issues that originate from home and outside of school.

Social and emotional learning becomes transformative in our schools and communities when we:

- Reconnect teachers to their passions, their students and each other
- Use a common language to infuse social and emotional learning (SEL) concepts into every activity and conversation
- Provide school leaders and teachers with the guidance to make a positive impact on school culture

When students and teachers make the connections that matter, academic performance goes up, and behavioral issues go down. As a result, schools become the amazing learning environments they were meant to be.

There are many causes behind aggressive behavior: low self-esteem, manifestation of defense mechanisms, fear, fear of ridicule, fear of low-grade rating.

The school environment must cover a wide range of children's education, in the way that must ensure both the accumulation of intellectual knowledge and skills through school curricula and socio-emotional development by developing self-esteem, self-control and social skills.

Thus, in a class with such situations, the teacher must ensure that these students are correctly assessed, helped to assimilate new behaviors, and that they are given the opportunity to participate in an educational process adapted to their needs, and that the level of stress is controlled, their progress is properly recorded and, where appropriate, they could receive specialized counseling.

4. Educational intervention strategies (positive teaching, positive discipline, STAR model, assertive discipline)

Positive teaching is an approach that has its roots in behaviorist and cognitive currents and uses cognitive-behavioral psychology methods. It is an interventionist strategy to assist students with disruptive behavior during the learning process. (Dârjan, I., 2010, apud Sonnett, H., 2006)

The positive teaching strategy aims at providing tailored curricula, developing learning skills, identifying skills and developing self-esteem for students, replacing a negative self-opinion with a positive one.

Positive teaching respects five principles (Dârjan, I. 2010):

Teaching must be concerned about what is visible.

The teacher must observe directly the student's behavior, without judging or trying to guess the reason for that behavior. For better recording of disruptive behavior types and their frequency, it is appropriate to use ABC model observation sheets (A – history, B – operational behavior / behavior C – consequences).

Almost all the behaviors in the classroom are learned.

Throughout their lives, students learn both good behavior and bad behavior. A behavior is the learning outcome. And according to the behaviorist theory, bad behaviors can be unraveled and replaced by good behaviors (learning – unlearning – learning).

Learning involves changing behavior.

Depending on the objectives we have set ourselves and with the help of the observation sheet we can write down and quantify the changes that have occurred before and after learning the new behavior.

The behavior changes as a result of its consequences.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that rewarding desirable behavior results in faster changes than punishing negative behavior.

Behaviors are influenced by class context.

Class movement during lessons can easily be resolved by establishing rules or by placing the teaching materials needed by children and desks in a certain position or near them.

Positive discipline

Discipline is the process of learning a behavior that requires patience, time, tact and attention from an adult (Nelsen, J., et. Al, 2001). Discipline therefore requires students to learn new, appropriate behaviors, accountability and consequences.

Frederick H. Jones, quoted by Pânișoară, I., O., Manolescu, M. coord., (2019 studied the behavior of teachers and students and concluded that “the rare interactions between teacher and student increase the chances that the group of pupils develop negative behaviors over time.

On this, Jones proposed a number of class management techniques aimed at:

- strategies to optimize the class structure by making use of space for social interactions;
- negotiation rules, as a result of a reality of common significance;
- group rewards earned through individual efforts;
- establishing a system to control students' behavior by applying low-level sanctions.”

According to Jones, “the teacher can assign:

- an immediate reward – students are informed in advance that they receive rewards if they do the listed tasks,
- a quick reward – the faster students complete a task, the more time they get for a favorite activity,
- an individual reward – as an individual compensatory measure, to avoid repeated breaches of the rules.”

The idea of discipline must be associated with the training, instructing and education of children. The purpose of discipline is not to subdue the child, nor to offer rewards, but rather to obtain his or her collaboration. **Positive discipline** implies that the adult should offer the child

unconditional love, availability (attention, time, positive attitude), direction (setting and reaching educational objectives), dosage (following the rules).

Positive discipline provides for methods of prevention and inappropriate behavior intervention, as well as disciplinary methods.

Prevention methods aim at meeting basic needs, clearly communicating expectations, reducing boredom, changing the environment, shaping good behavior, providing alternatives.

Intervention methods include physical removal from an object or person, information on the reasons, ignorance of behavior, consequences, hearing the feelings of the child.

Disciplinary methods are as follows: learning the new behavior, strengthening the already learned behavior, motivating the child in acquiring desirable behavior.

According to the authors Botiș, A. și Tărău, A. (2004), teaching a child a new behavior "involves successive steps: defining new behavior, fragmentation of behavior in smaller stages, guiding the child (providing help, explanations and even a model), offering rewards (initially aiming at reducing them)".

When we want to strengthen an already learned positive behavior or motivate the adoption of a new one, we can nominate and appreciate it every time we see it or reward it.

Positive discipline requires that every child learn to establish relationships with others, be emotionally strong, be autonomous, be attentive to his or her needs and those around, to be happy and to help others to be happy.

STAR model, proposed by Zarkowska and Clements (1994), is the "acronym for factors involved in maintaining the pupils' emotional – behavioral disorders:

S - settings (contexts, media features),

T – triggers (triggers occurring before behavior occurs),

A — actions (new actions, behaviors to be learned or encouraged),

R — results (results of behavior, consequences).

The STAR model assumes a student approach with respect, empathy, unconditional acceptance, love”.

Assertive discipline is an approach that is based on the dialog with students with behavioral problems and dates back to 1970, introduced by Lee Canter and his collaborators. Initially, this approach aimed at controlling students in an authoritarian way and increasing discipline in school. It has subsequently moved toward a democratic approach, through the cooperation of students with the teacher, who will have an assertive and not aggressive attitude.

According to Canter quoted by Panisoara, I., O., Manolescu, M. (Coord., 2019), the teacher should carefully analyze the profile of the class, based on questions like: "What behavior of the students should be stimulated / discouraged? What effects do the behavior in question have, positive/negative? How can clear evidence of developments in both types of behavior be recorded?"

After collecting the information, the teacher will start to draw up an action plan containing:

- ”1. the agreement of those involved in the behavioral change plan;
2. drawing up observable, applicable rules, including solutions for typical situations and indicating expected behavior;
3. designing the positive consequences of acceptable behavior (positive reinforcement requirements are specified);
4. designing the negative consequences of the infringement behavior, organized gradually according to their severity. These consequences, without being in a large number, shall be consistently applied and shall not be harmful to the entity or the physical integrity of the student;

5. communication of the plan to those involved.”

Therefore it is imperative that the teacher establishes a system of discipline with the students: class rules, the consequences of breaking them, the strengthening of students' desirable behavior.

All these activities were implemented with physical participation and then with online participation, during the school year 2019-2020, once a week, at a private school in the city of Constanta, with 8 - 9 years old students in the optional cross curricular subject “*The Story Behind Life*”.

Within this cross curricular subject, we have sought the validation of positive behavior, the development of analyzing and solve conflict capacity, through rational-positive thinking, as well as an attitude change leading to socially desirable behavior.

We have addressed content such as: ways of learning self-awareness and developing relationships, identifying emotions, accepting them and expressing feelings, managing emotions (anxiety, guilt, depression, sadness, anger), anger management, controlling aggressiveness and developing new ways of communication, self-acceptance, respect for itself and others, expressing empathy, strengthening values (altruism, diligence, mutual assistance), resolving internal and external conflicts.

5. Conclusions

Due to the situation created by the COVID pandemic, both in Romania and in most of the other affected countries, schools have been closed. As of 11 March 2020, teaching has moved exclusively online, so the experimental program has been limited to taking certain steps and could not be carried out in the optimum conditions initially.

However, all the techniques and methods used were intended to determine whether the experimental program had led to changes in the socio-relational behaviors between the students. Although the program has been running for only a few months, there is an improvement in positive behavior and a reduction in negative behavior. We therefore believe that the program has produced beneficial effects and important changes from the perspective of both students and parents.

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