

## Some aspects of the children-friendly school with holistic approach

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### Abstract:

*This paper reviews the characteristics of a good school, emphasising the role of human relationships in the learning process and how relationships can be developed. It highlights the importance of taking human needs into account at school and the importance of the teacher's personality in creating a quality classroom atmosphere and education. It concludes with the idea that a good school takes a holistic view of the child's personality and needs, and that teachers can provide for this.*

**Keywords:** the importance of social relationships, human needs at school, supportive school climate, the teacher's role, humanistic, positive pedagogy

### Introduction

The great school is the dream of each child and parent. It is what is good to attend, where it is good to learn and where the teaching material and the attention to the people's human needs are in an appropriate harmony. A modern school of the 21st century shall establish a balance between the attention to the child's features of his/her age and the developmental psychology, as well as the meeting the requirements of the curriculum in general. Several studies have been completed worldwide to understand what can make the school, teaching, and learning more effective and humane (MacGilchrist, Myers, Reed, 2011, Levine, Lezotte, 2001). The mentioned studies focus on the basic human needs and the general psychological and social needs of the participants of school, teachers, and students during the development of the educational process.

This article is a narrative literature review that focuses on exploring some of the features of a quality school. The research question is, what characterises a good school in the 21st century? The hypothesis: a good school is based on three main factors: 1) the development of social relationships, 2) the consideration of the human needs of students in the educational process, 3) and the educator who plays a crucial role in creating the development.

The importance of the above factors is also supported by international literature, which increasingly emphasises the consideration of the students' perspectives following

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a holistic approach. This can only be achieved if the teacher has professional competencies to facilitate the right atmosphere and balance the curriculum and learners.

### **Relationships in schools**

A school is not just a place for teaching, learning and developing skills but a complex system of human relationships. The years spent in school socialising and the institutional education develop social skills and behaviour. Meanwhile, new friendships and relationships are established, and the class community is growing. It got clear during the pandemic, when online education was typical, that the relationships with the mates of the same age are significant in children's life. Learning at home was a lonely activity; most children missed their classmates and the experience with their friends. Many children wait for school after the summer vacation because they can meet their friends again (Torgyik, 2021). The students learn how to approach other people, express their feelings and their empathy, the helping others, care for each other, and develop interpersonal skills during the school years. The learning process occurs in a complex system of human relationships and the school provides the social context. The school is supposed to be the community of students and its quality influences the children's learning and well-being. The experience of mutual trust, the relationships based on acceptance, and the community are essential for the children from the point of healthy personality development. A good school can be characterised by positive interpersonal relationships and tries deliberately to guide the human relationships in the appropriate direction during the teaching process and provide safety for the students.

It is well-known from the psychological studies that friendship and friends mean support, protection in stressful situations and during the management of difficulties while contributing to the children's personal development and general well-being (Morris, 2009). A coherent class community provides the feeling of belonging somewhere and acceptance, while the exclusion from the group, and the isolation increase the risk of eliminating school and learning. The appropriate relationships in class mean preventing bullying (Aronson, 2009). The class is the place to exercise social skills every day.

A qualitative school encourages and develops the relationships and shapes the social competencies with targeted pedagogical measures (Torgyik, 2020). Student relationships can be created by various methods, cooperative techniques, and pair and team-works. Cooperation with others is essential for each child, especially for ones with unbeneficial conditions, being at the edge of society or under the risk of exclusion, living with a disability, having a different cultural background or belonging to another ethnical or language group for it can provide a kind of chance to be accepted, taken into a community and understood for them. It is vital during the inclusion to improve the cooperation instead of competition within the class to improve performance and social relationships. The students' speaking time increases during the events of cooperative learning, the feelings get more attention, and the individual opinions can be expressed. Such kinds of

conversation can provide an opportunity to understand the partner, interpret the thoughts and feelings together, and learn from each other.

Further opportunity to improve relationships is the so-called group of conversation, which can be at the beginning or the end of the day or the week. Any of them is suitable to teach children more deeply and understand each other, as well as improve their acceptance, discretion and tolerance (Maholmes, 2014). A conversation is constructive based on understanding, listening, and empathy. The students who know each other better are more ready to be friends and support each other. The relationships based on mutual trust and acceptance represent a social reserve that can be activated even after school if necessary. Good relationships provide the feeling of belonging to a community, as well as the feeling of being accepted (T. Slee, Skrzypiec, 2016).

The frequent application of cooperative techniques is supposed to be important from another point of view as well. Studies (Maier, 2000) have found that if the students' activity increases within the teaching and learning process, it can significantly improve their learning performance. A student is not just a receiver but an active creator of his/her knowledge during the learning. The students help and explain to each other; each group member can contribute to the common work with his/her ideas, points and part. Atkinson (2014) thinks that students like more and feel more exciting the learning if they have a chance for more activities or can process a topic, they are interested in. It is the teacher's duty to provide as many opportunities as possible for the students to cooperate, share their experiences and ideas and contact each other during the teaching process (Jacobs, Renandya, 2019).

A simple method to improve social connections is the „Buddy Bench” used in more European schools (e.g., UK, Croatia). The idea originated in the US; one schoolchild was the inventor. Buddy Bench Croatia – a Croatian project that aims to strengthen the students' connections. On the schoolyard of elementary school, a colourful bench was placed; students were instructed to sit there if they were alone and liked befriending; furthermore, if students saw someone there, they could invite them to play and chat. The main aim was to boost positive interactions and facilitate tolerance and friendships.

Psychological studies also confirmed the effect of the Buddy Bench. According to an observation and questionnaire survey conducted at primary schools in the US (Griffin, Caldarella, Sabey, Heath, 2017), students were happy to use the Buddy Bench, and most of them had a reasonable opinion about the instruction, to be seen at school next school year as well. Researchers have observed that this has reduced the number of lonely students, increased social cohesion, acceptance among students, and more new friendships.

### **Students' human needs**

A qualitative school also focuses on the students' physical and mental well-being. Its everyday practice is based on the consideration of the basic human needs while trying to understand the children and focusing on the person with his/her features originating

from the anthropological characteristics. Due to the fact that a human is a rationally thinking creature, is guided by his/her emotions and has a dual nature, all of it shall be considered during the teaching process. The needs were learnt in humanistic psychology, and its application and distribution are typical for the practice of humanistic pedagogy. The human needs were described by Maslow first and improved by others later. One of them was Professor Skiera (1994), who identified seven primary human needs in connection with the child and the school; and called them existential motives. They are 1) the requirement for emotional protection, safety and contact, 2) the need for appreciation and recognition, 3) the need for new experience, knowledge, skills and capabilities, 4) the freedom, 5) the responsibility for us and others, 6) the need for esthetical experience, 7) the need to express the internal conditions spontaneously. They can be parallel to the system described by Maslow from many points because the two conceptions overlap each other.

Undoubtedly, a children-friendly school provides protection and safety for everyone. The students want to feel safe during the teaching and learning process, which can be guaranteed by the pleasant school atmosphere (Klein, 2002), the acceptance, the lack of aggression and violence, and the stability of the environment (Skiera, 1994). Acceptance and inclusion are essential in school life, and all students shall be affected independently by their personal and cultural features (e.g., gender, age, family or social background, place of residence, language and ethnicity, as well as skills). Inclusion is a kind of ethical measurement of a school and represents the rate to what extent a school is fair.

The lack of acceptance, the refusal, the exclusion, the mockery, the condemnation, and the humiliation are very dangerous for any child in the pedagogical practice (Hunyady, M. Nádas, Serfőző, 2006, Aronson, 2009). It can cause and result in psychosomatic symptoms, bad feelings, elimination of school and severe cases, even leaving of education and early drop-out. The unpleasant school experience can cause problems, mainly because the school aims to make children like learning, maintain curiosity, prepare for lifelong learning, and maintain the desire for learning. If a student is rejected by his/her mates or pedagogues, it can be completely opposite to the declared purposes of the school. Several examples show the severe results of school bullying, the feeling of being threatened, the anxiety and the fear. Children growing up in a safe, caring, accepting environment are more active and braver in the learning process, and as the teachers observed, they learn more (Atkinson, 2014).

Unlike “black pedagogy”, positive pedagogy is much more effective and based on acceptance, respect, and improvement of valuable human characteristics. Positive psychology (Szondy, 2009, Harzer, Weber, Huebner, 2021) and the school applying positive pedagogy (O’Brien, Blue, 2018) focus on the person’s strengths and try to improve them within the teaching process (Lander, 2020, Kumar, Mohideen, 2021). The desire for praise and recognition is typical for everyone within their family, friends, school, or workplace. The positive feedbacks facilitate the improvement of personality, give power, motivate and help to go on the selected way in every field during the learning

process. The recognition and support of good characters provide the feeling of being precious and helpful support during the completion of duties. The encouragement and the praise of positive points advance learning and provide help and encouragement in case of failure or adverse events. Recognising and appreciating positive personal characters improve the students' self-confidence. A good school believes in the child's ability to develop and his/her internal power and skills. It is not looking for the faults but instead uses the person's positive features as a foundation (Réthy, 2007).

One of the features of a qualitative school is the chance to live freedom (Skiera, 1994) for both the teachers and students. The studies on work psychology verify its importance. A person feels much better if he/she can choose the tools, the methods, the speed of work and has the freedom of choice during the work or learning (Klein, 2002). It provides the feeling of consideration of freedom, autonomy, individual ideas, and it can establish a strong foundation of motivation in teaching and learning. It requires great flexibility to meet the need for freedom during the teaching process to provide a chance for the students' ideas and purposes in the lesson. The provision of responsibility facilitates development. A child can develop through duties and practical tasks (Bábosik, 2004). The assignment of duties and responsibilities is a form of recognition, for it means that the teachers believe in the student and know he/she can complete it.

The improvement of emotional life and emotional education in school has been more and more critical than any time before due to the success of Goleman's (2019) book on emotional intelligence. The improvement and maintenance of positive emotions contribute to the balanced improvement of the whole personality. (Best, 1998) It is vital to verify it because education at school tends to emphasise the cognitive area.

The inappropriate management of emotions and the fact that the reasons behind our emotions are identified can cause several problems or even diseases. A school emphasising negative things can cause stress, anxiety, and bad feelings. (Darling-Hammond, Cook-Harvey, 2018) The correct emotional control is connected to the proper self-understanding, the appropriate social relationships, as well as the more effective stress management. Dynamic education may have several forms. The conversation, the response to the emotions of own and others, the artistic activities, and the different forms of playing belong to it. The arts, the beauty and harmony provide peace (Gal, Gane, 2018), but art can provide the chance to express ourselves and is an excellent opportunity to show our emotions at the same time. The teaching process shall focus not only on the development of sense but on the more expressed consideration of emotions, reactions to them, experience and understanding of emotions of own and others as well. A child has a holistic approach, and his/her physical, mental, cognitive, emotional and social development facilitates the harmonic personality.

Paying attention to human needs and developing the whole personality has a long tradition in reform pedagogy. Waldorf, Montessori and Freinet schools approach children holistically, in addition to the cognitive sphere, the social-emotional area is considered in pedagogical work. Their characteristic feature is that they seek to strike a balance in

teaching between academic, emotional and social areas. They strive to love learning and give them more freedom during the educational process. Waldorf schools space a particular emphasis on art, music, and the beauty of the school environment.

However, in many EU member states, much has been taken over from the practice of the reform pedagogy in „traditional schools,” and educational institutions have become more child-friendly. Today the European Union is also promoting a whole-school approach, which is expected to improve students' mental health and well-being. (Cefai, Simoes, Caravita, 2021)

Another needs-based model of the theory of education was established by Bábosik (2004), who divided the human needs in school into 1) biogenic, 2) psychogenic 3) sociogenic needs and describes education focusing on these factors. While the biogenic needs are born with us, the psychogenic ones are of mental origin. The sociogenic needs are connected to the person's social nature. The correct diet and enough sleep can be mentioned as part of the first ones, and they are the factors that provide the essential biological conditions for effective learning. It is clear that a hungry, feeling cold and undernourished child can hardly concentrate on learning. A sleepy student gets tired more quickly and might have problems with concentration and difficulties during the lesson.

Bábosik (2004) says that the needs for variety, creation and collection belong to the category of mental needs. A child requires new things, the change, the type that can be satisfied by the school with the help of different duties, various teaching methodologies and a wide choice of learning. There are several chances to create, produce new things, be creative during school life.

The need for love, friendship, as well as fairness belongs to the group of sociogenic needs in this model. As it has already been mentioned, the improvement of relationships based on positive things and mutuality, the support of friendship among students, the application of cooperative techniques and the elimination of exclusion are essential pedagogical duties in education. A real and good friendship features are mutual trust, support, empathy and forgiveness. (Morris, 2009, Maholmes, 2014) The shaping and improvement of interpersonal relationships, the development of social skills, the application of cooperative techniques, and the provision of common experience help students feel better at school, support each other in the learning process and contribute to meeting their social needs. The friends can help each other with schoolwork and out of school with advice, sharing their knowledge and support. (Maholmes, 2014)

An excellent example of the development of social relations is the KIP (complex instruction program) introduced at the school in Hejőkeresztúr, Hungary. (K. Nagy, 2015). In doing so in heterogeneous groups, students spend less than about 20% of them performing cooperative tasks. Teamwork builds on interdependence and positive interactions with creative, divergent thinking. All group members have a responsibility, and disadvantaged children, those with unfavourable status in the classroom, can also show their skills. This program, initially from the US, was developed at Stanford

University to improve learning performance. The students at the school in Hejőkeresztúr come from different ethnic groups; many of them are Roma. In the experience of educators, students prefer to go to school, there is more interaction and friendship, and the level of acceptance has increased since the program was introduced. The success of the program is shown by the fact that many pedagogues have been trained to use the method since its inception, and a methodological center has been established at the University of Miskolc.

The student's whole personality, physical, mental, social and emotional needs, and different dimensions of learning shall be considered during the teaching process to make a school more humane, more adjustable to children, loveable and more effective. The knowledge and identification of human needs within the school system make the teacher's work more effective and the school more successful.

### **The teacher's role**

The extent of the attention to the child's needs and the development of the community depends on the teacher and his/her knowledge and professional skills very much. Namely, how the teacher knows the system of human needs and what pedagogical methods and techniques can apply to develop holistically and encourage them at school. The child is influenced by his/her personality and acceptance. The teachers play a vital role in the pedagogical process, their personality and professional competencies affect the students' well-being, mental health, success, school performance, future career, as well as efficiency of the school. A returning and frequently asked question of several studies, what features make a good teacher and what human characteristics, and professional skills are essential for him/her.

Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (quoted by MacGilchrist, Myers, Reed, 2011. p. 90) have interviewed secondary school students about the features of a good teacher. According to their findings, a good teacher respects students, provides emotional support for them, provides challenging tasks, gives autonomy, and handles all students independently of his/her features and the students feel safe in his/her class. The items listed above are in harmony with the image of a teacher considering the system of human needs. If a pedagogue considers both the teaching material and students' physical and mental health, as well as their common well-being, it gets popular.

Looking for the features of a good school, the ideas about a good teacher could be detected. Primary and secondary school students were interviewed about their ideas on a qualitative school in Hungary (Torgyik, 2021). The students said a good school meant a good teacher and class community. We have to note that the students mentioned the positive human relationships as factors determining their attitudes and feelings toward school. They believe that a good teacher is empathetic, helpful, able to motivate, calls attention to the subject, fair, patient, and humorous. Mutual respect was necessary for the students, and they think a teacher shall not only teach the subject but provide emotional support for them as well. They shall pay attention to the teaching material and the student

as a human. They prefer those teachers who care for them and do not focus on the subject and the teaching requirements only. Emotional and mental support was a general requirement of students or the teachers.

Atkinson (2014) thinks a good teacher involves the students in learning and activates them continuously. He/she establishes a balance between the teacher's guidance, the facilitation and the activation. Sándor Klein (2002) had similar findings in his study and said that the teachers had an essential role in shaping the correct relationships and friendships and establishing a good class atmosphere. The teacher is a facilitator, the motivator, and the stimulator of learning. Knowledge can be gained from several sources nowadays, so the teacher's duty is not only to transfer knowledge, but to arouse interest and maintain useful relationships are much more critical than before.

McGuiness (2000) has found that the people working in professions of encouraging types, such as pedagogues, doctors, or nurses, have common social and psychological features that make them successful and accepted professionals. These features are the following: available, supporting, patient, understanding, humorous, enthusiastic, positive, considerate and having time for the other person.

Learning in school requires a unique atmosphere, which teachers can provide. The pleasant atmosphere provided by the teacher makes the correct foundation for the educational process and decreases the anxiety and the fears in learning. It gives safety, where the mistakes are not negative but the natural part of development. Under such circumstances, the student doesn't need to be afraid because they are aware of the fact that nobody hurts them and unconditional acceptance, positive support and encouragement can be felt. The student feels more protected in a friendly environment; the peace and the decreased stress support their learning to a great extent.

A positive class atmosphere is supposed to provide trust, where the teachers believe in the student and his/her skills and encourage and love their students. A pleasant atmosphere decreases the behavioural problems, the anxiety if any because the students can feel that they are accepted, their satisfaction with and link to school improvement and their performance is getting better. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) having reviewed 78 studies about the school atmosphere, think that a pleasant atmosphere can compensate for the negative effects of poverty on performance. The acceptance and the pedagogue's support improve the performance and contribute to the students' success. It is especially important for students with an unbeneficial condition, disability or living in the minority. The pleasant atmosphere is based on mutual respect and acceptance, as well as a decrease in stress. The teachers in such an environment speak to their students with respect and expect the same from them. But it is also essential that the family and the parents respect teachers and institutional education, accept education, and cooperate with them regularly.

Hervainé (2015) underlines the attention to and the management of the students' problems, as well as the community from the students' points of view saying that these factors can contribute to the students' school environment. She states that the application

of positive methods of psychology is required to improve students' well-being. The mental care and the care for human relationships make the students like learning. Klein (2002) underlines the care for students for it facilitates personality development. According to Carl Rogers' personality-oriented approach, the teacher's competence, authenticity, empathy and unconditional acceptance can encourage student development. If an educator is more empathetic to the students, the students are more likely to accept each other. (Rogers, 2002) The teacher's accepting attitude is essential.

The Carl Rogers School in Budapest is an excellent example of putting the principles of humanistic psychology into practice. In their pedagogical program, they emphasise that the first element of education is the creation of a calm, relaxed atmosphere and acknowledging all students, regardless of their characteristics. Safety and empathy are created for the students by the pedagogue who actively cooperate with the parents.

The teacher's care and attention facilitate the students' personal development and school performance. A caring educator is available not only during the lessons but he/she is supposed to be interested and friendly during the breaks and out of lessons. (Searly, Willians, 2020) He/she spends his/her time with students, cares for them and wants to develop them and that's why he/she provides duties and expectations. His/her attention can be detected in different ways, in the conversations, the careful listening, the help and the sensitivity toward the students' needs. The care makes the school human and qualitative.

## Conclusion

To sum it up, we may say that a good school holistically approaches the students and pays attention to the teaching material and the student as a human with all his/her personality. It considers the student's wide range of human needs, cares for the relationships, and friendships and often applies cooperative techniques during the teaching and learning process. It improves the whole personality considering the physical, mental and social needs. A school can be made a qualitative and children-friendly place by pedagogues who provide an accepting and safe atmosphere, as well as the essential conditions for learning, having careful attitudes and facilitating the students' correct learning, mental well-being, and healthy development. Future research on a holistic approach can fundamentally address the areas mentioned above of how to develop social relationships, support human needs at school, and the teachers' role.

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