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The importance of a "heart-to-heart" conversation as part of emotional education in elementary schools

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Abstract

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Pressure of national and international achievements tests, results in elementary schools dedicating most of their time to promoting pupils' achievements. However, does school dedicate time to students' emotional availability to learning? Under the "New Horizon" educational reform in Israel, homeroom teachers must dedicate one weekly hour to individual emotional conversations with pupils. This decision relies on development theories regarding emotional conversations as vital to learning processes. I believe in managing a "heart to heart conversations" system shared by the entire school staff, a policy that requires overall solutions, but paves the way to pupils' emotional availability to learning and resulting success. Emotional conversation has many advantages for the teachers as well such as: getting to know children beyond their learning abilities, matching expectations and become more significant for their pupils.

Last but not list, educational climate is always an optimal goal for the Ministry of Education.

I will argue that personal conversations between the entire school staff and pupils, and between pupils themselves are the first tool to be employed in order to optimize the educational climate in schools.

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Keywords: Emotional education; Individual emotional conversations; educational reforms; individual hours; development theories; promoting pupils' achievements.

1. Introduction

Schools invest most of their time in advancing pupils' achievements and providing learned materials, predominantly because they are under pressure of national and international achievement tests: accommodations, reinforcements, practice papers, across the broad and individual hours ... all



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these in order to respond to learning needs. However, is the success of children in their studies achieved solely by answering their learning needs?

Do schools respond to pupils' emotional needs (this means all children at school, and not just those diagnosed as having special educational needs) in order to enable them to apply themselves to learning?

In the last decade, Israel has operated in an educational reform, 'New Horizons', has been implemented in Israeli elementary and junior high schools. This reform encompasses many aspects of school life and teachers' schedules. Teachers' working weeks have changed and now, as well as frontal teaching, they have to teach five hours of teaching in small groups, made up of **up to five pupils**. **Three individual** hours are meant for advancing pupils' studies and the recommendation is that the other two hours should be for emotional discourse and social discourse.

In practice, managing individual hours changes from one learning institution to another and depends, in fact, on the policy outlined by each school's management. Moreover, teachers sometimes prefer to waive emotional and social discourse and devote these precious hours to management of class issues such as: conversations with parents, telephone conversations, photocopying and more. In contrast - during my 20 years working as a homeroom and subject teacher, I have encountered situations that have demanded personal conversations with pupils, but time did not allow it ... the system ... and many other constraints.

Studies have shown that there is a correlation between pupils' perceptions and feelings with regard to their school climate and the creation of negative or pathological behaviors. Since pupils' feelings rely to a large extent on the how well their basic and optimal needs are met, it is very important to fulfill these needs within the school framework (Erhardt, 2001).

The aim of this article is to emphasize the importance of personal conversations between teachers and pupils at every age level in elementary school. Emotional discourse has many advantages such as: getting to know children beyond their learning abilities, matching expectations, .. reducing fear, creating senses of safety and belonging that lead to emotional application to and success in studies. We can say that in order to cope with learning, social tasks at school, pupils need a supportive connection with a teacher from members of the school's staff. I believe that a supportive connection can be made with any teacher, and not specifically a homeroom teacher. Chemistry...areas of interest...are likely to create ... emotions...liking...these create the differences in relationships between teachers and pupils. Many adults remember subject teachers as a significant figure from their school days. That is to say that personal/private emotional discourse is not the legacy of homeroom teachers alone. Every teacher at school must carry out personal/private emotional discourse with their pupils. The responsibility and concern for fulfilling basic and optimal needs of pupils within the confines of schools belongs to the entire educational staff and not just homeroom teachers.

Personal emotional discourse with pupils in which all educational staff members participate is a clear statement of the importance of emotional education alongside education for learning achievements. This is a school policy according to which all members of staff must be participants. It is clear that its implementation is not so simple but from my experience, it is possible. It is important to

point out that over and above systemic solutions that schools have to provide, teachers must be given the tools to conduct personal/private emotional discourse and opportunities to practice this skill.

In the first part of this article, I will present the argument that meaningful relationships between teachers and pupils that include private emotional discourse are important in order to create emotional application to learning and I will base this argument on theories from the world of developmental and educational psychology. In the second part, I will present the roles of teachers as presented in Ministry of Education documents; I will refer to the 'New Horizon' educational reform as an educational opportunity to strengthen the relationships between teachers and their pupils through personal emotional discourse. In the third part, I will present dilemmas affecting the conduct of personal/private emotional discourse in schools.

I will conclude the article by proposing an education model for conducting personal emotional discourse at elementary school.

2. Theoretical Background

The transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school is a complex and challenging process. Children have to acquire such new skills such as learning, social and emotional skills. They have to adapt to surroundings that are very different from what they knew in kindergarten, and move to a large classroom, more crowded and distant, to a less warm and protected framework, to a less intimate relationship with teachers and a more structure and achievement driven system. Children are also exposed to a range of new learning tasks such as reading, writing, arithmetic, comprehension. They have to integrate into a large peer group and should share with their classmates their teachers' limited resources of time and attention. All these are complex and unfamiliar challenges, and in order to cope with them successfully, children need supportive relationships with adults, namely with teachers.

Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist approach emphasizes the role of teachers as **human mediators** in children acquiring and molding ways of thinking. The encounter between children and adults is most essential for learning. Adults censor, organize, interpret and regulate stimuli that reach children and mold their ways of thinking. They serve as mediators between the world and children, until children can mediate the world for themselves; that is to say until they are able to react to, organize, and interpret new stimuli and solve problems independently (Miller, 2011). Woods (1995) argued that **teachers are 'significant others'** for pupils and that the relationship that is created with teachers who become 'significant others' for pupils can strengthen their confidence in relation to other adult figures at school. Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory refers to safe learning circles and emphasizes that when children's safety needs are met sensitively by available attachment figures, who operate as partners in **emotionally secure circles**, children are capable of applying their emotional resources and investing their intellectual powers, e.g. curiosity, in order to investigate their surroundings and create relationships with other significant figures. Teachers who maintain direct and permanent relationships with children over time are likely to be attachment figures that provide them with support and assistance when needed, as well as being another safety source that enables them to study, examine and

broaden horizons. Teachers provide pupils with a safety base that enables them to investigate their surroundings, take an interest in other children, and later on develop their independence in class and at school and at the same time to serve them as a safe harbor to which they can return when needed (Miller, 2011).

In recent years, attachment relations with teachers at elementary school have been examined and it was found that safe relations with teachers are important especially when significant figures in children's families do not provide safety. In these cases, the significant relationships with teachers are likely to serve as a protective and compensatory factor. Alongside negative attachment representation, with parents for example, children will build positive representations that will guide them at least in some future situations in their lives (Ahnert et. al., 2012).

One of the important predictors of safe relationship with significant others is sensitive behavior on the part of adults (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Teachers' sensitivity is defined as awareness of their pupils' learning and emotional needs. Therefore, sensitive teachers are those who consistently provide comfort, calmness and encouragement. They are aware of problems and emotional distresses that their pupils are likely to experience and pay attention to lack of understanding or difficulties in their studies. When teachers are sensitive, one can see that pupils feel comfortable to seek their support and guidance, participate freely in lessons and are not afraid of saying something wrong or making mistakes during learning (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008).

The quality of the relationship between children and teachers is also affected by the quality of teachers' relationships with parent. Encounters between teachers and parent can take place in the presence of children or not. **Bronfenbrenner** (1986) argued that the relationships between teachers and parents that are based on mutual trust, common goals and positive orientation, result in children's positive development. The quality of relationships between teachers and parents will create a certain discourse between parents and their children (for or against teachers), and this discourse will affect the relationships between these children and their teachers.

Bandura's (1997) theory of social learning emphasizes **self-efficacy** as an essential and necessary component of children's learning process, without it learning will not take place and learning achievements will not be reached. Through the increase of self-efficacy, a process of empowerment will take place, which is a transition from a helpless situation to one of greater control of life, fate and environment and improve learning achievements. One of teachers' roles is to identify their pupils' strong point and lead them to self-realization to a point of excellence.

On the basis of reading the literature, we can say that: teachers as mediators or significant others for their pupils in a school framework, are likely to create, among pupils, a sense of belonging to the school and perception of it as a safe and caring place, increase their motivation to learn and help them adapt appropriately to educational and social frameworks.

The question is asked whether we can say that these processes can be realized for every pupil in a large classroom framework. On the basis of my vast experience as a teacher educator and professional teacher, I will argue that for teachers in large classrooms it is impossible to reach all pupils, to identify their strengths and weaknesses or their needs. Within the framework of general education, classes are too big and their makeup heterogeneous and naturally teachers are more attentive to children who stand

out because of their learning or behavioral background. Consequently, in addition to teachers' educational work in class, they need additional opportunities to get to know their pupils. These opportunities can manifest in personal conversations. In personal conversations teachers can reinforce, guide, listen, advise, engage in activities that have the ability to reduce fears, create feelings of safety and belonging, meet the needs of pupils, coordinate expectations, intensify and of course, create emotional availability to learning.

3. Teachers' Roles

Looking at Ministry of Education documents (Ministry of Education official website: <http://cms.education.gov.il/educationcms/units/sherut/odot/odot.htm>) indicates that the role of teachers in Israel refers to areas of knowledge they have to study, pedagogical aspects linked to curricula and technical aspects linked to their conduct in class, with colleagues and their supervisors in school. The distinction is obvious: the role of professional teachers refers only to transferring knowledge and managing pupils' behavior. At school, they have no obligation to conduct that does not directly apply to learning. In cases where teachers are also homeroom teachers, they have other administrative responsibilities connected to the class's social conduct and passing on information from various teachers who teach their pupils as seen in documents referring to the role of class teachers. In other words, at elementary school, **there is no reference to teachers' obligation to create personal relationships with pupils**. The terminology refers predominantly to reporting obligations to school principals, teachers, pedagogic councils and parents. Teachers' obligations are predominantly to report on problems that arise and not to follow children's conduct during their studies. Another responsibility placed on homeroom teachers is to deal with discipline problems.

The question is whether we can say that these processes can be realized for every pupil in a large classroom framework. Based on my vast experience as a teacher educator and professional teacher, I will argue that for teachers in large classrooms it is impossible to reach all pupils, to identify their strengths and weaknesses or their needs. Within the framework of general education, classes are too big and their makeup heterogeneous and naturally teachers are more attentive to children who stand out because of their learning or behavioral background. Consequently, in addition to teachers' educational work in class, they need additional opportunities to get to know their pupils. These opportunities can manifest in personal conversations. In personal conversations teachers can reinforce, guide, listen, advise, engage in activities that have the ability to reduce fears, create feelings of safety and belonging, meet the needs of pupils, coordinate expectations, intensify and of course, create emotional availability to learning.

Since 2006, the 'New Horizon' reform has been implemented in Israel (in kindergarten, elementary and junior high schools), which covers many aspects of school life (RAMA, 2012). This reform was meant to bring about an improvement in teachers' status and salary, as well as promoting pedagogic processes in schools, out of a desire to improve learning achievements of Israeli pupils, to promote a learning climate and reduce the levels of violence.

Within the reform's framework, full-time teachers' working weeks were changed and since then have included frontal hours, individual hours (teaching small groups) and hours intended for class management (meetings with parents, correcting tests and the like. Prior to the reform teachers' working weeks only included frontal hours in class).

One of the predominant goals of the reform is **teaching and learning that focus on individuals and groups** through 'individual hours'. Within the framework of individual teaching (teacher-pupil and/or studying in small groups) teachers are meant to assist struggling pupils' studies, nurture outstanding pupils and those with unique skills. Individual hours are also intended to carry out intimate dialogue between teachers and pupils. This possibility invites a deeper acquaintance between teachers and their pupils, providing personal attention and relationships to pupils and responding appropriately to pupils' needs, such as the need to have a sense of belonging, of being liked and accepted by others; the need for appreciation, esteem and respect; the need to sense autonomy and academic and social self-efficacy.

In January 2014, pupils' 'emotional growth' (Ministry of Education: <http://meyda.education.gov.il/files/lemidaMashmautit/TochneitLeumit.pdf>) was identified as one of the central goals of the educational system. However, in practice, this refers more to cognitive elements than emotional one, but I see this goal and the 'New Horizon' reform (individual hours) as leverage for change in perceptions of teachers' responsibilities. According to this approach, teachers are not only responsible for pupils' learning achievements and dealing with discipline problems, but also for creating significant emotional and social relationships with pupils. This does not mean that prior to elementary schools participating in the reform; they did not worry about pupils' welfare at school, but the very fact that the structure of teachers' working weeks to include individual hours alongside frontal teaching is an important statement about the essentiality of relationships between teachers and pupils.

4. Dilemmas

In previous chapters, I presented and based my arguments on the issue of the importance of personal discourse between teachers and pupils with theories from the educational and psychological worlds. I referred to teachers' professional responsibility as expressed by Ministry of Education documents, the 'New Horizon' reform (implemented as stated in Israel since 2006) and the opportunities it has presented to establish intimate dialogue between teachers and pupils using individual hours. In this section, I will present a number of issues with regard to realization and conduct of systems for private conversations in which all school staff participate.

First question is who is responsible for this?

As I pointed out, today educational work at schools is carried out in classes with many students and under great pressure to achieve what teachers and pupils are set. However, the situation has improved somewhat since the introduction of the 'New Horizon' reform, and teachers have relatively more opportunities to meet with pupils individually in school, however, the number of hours for meetings between homeroom teachers and their pupils in class remains limited and this therefore raises questions about the ability to build and maintain significant relationships.

Ministry of Education documents show a clear distinction between homeroom teachers and subject teachers. Subject teachers are responsible solely for passing on subject materials and when these teachers also serve as homeroom teachers, they also have to fulfill other administrative roles connected to their classes' conduct etc. Is the responsibility for pupils' emotional growth in elementary school placed solely on homeroom teachers? Definitely not. In my opinion, the entire school staff must take part in personal conversations with pupils. Firstly, on a technical basis, in light of the reality of large and complex classes, it is impossible to expect that homeroom teachers can carry out meaningful personal conversations with pupils a number of times annually together with all their other roles. In addition, I believe that the responsibility to meet the basic and optimal needs of school pupils belongs to the entire teaching staff. It is true that teaching staff are kept up to date about pupils they teach at pedagogic meetings, but in general they are about pupils with special needs about whom schools have an obligation to report. In my opinion, every teacher at school, whether a subject or homeroom teacher, must permanently conduct personal conversations with pupils. Dialogue between the entire educational team will create a unified language at school, one of discussion, caring, taking an interest. This is a language that emphasizes not just educational aspects, but emotional ones as well.

More than once subject teachers report to homeroom teachers about various experiences between them and pupils, or between class pupils with expectations that once the information has been passed on, homeroom teachers will deal with events. Individual hours and conducting personal conversations tools provide subject teachers with the same opportunities as homeroom teachers.

The second question is can teachers have the skills to conduct emotional discourse?

The simple, but unpleasant answer is no. In practice, many teachers refrain from initiating personal conversations with pupils because they feel they do not have sufficient skills to do so. Therefore, schools must provide teachers with tools to conduct emotional educational dialogue and allow them to practice this skill.

The latest literature refers to skills required by teachers in the 21st century. In the past, mainly technological aspects of teaching were discussed (mastering media, online teaching, technological aids), today educational research deals with teacher training, points out that teachers' responsibilities are also attached to their face to face relationships with pupils as well as their environment, parents and families and not just to instilling knowledge. In order to succeed in teaching, teachers are and will be given more and more responsibility to get to know diverse cultures and backgrounds from which pupils come, to understand their complexities, and recruit families to schools. Therefore, at teacher training colleges around the world, student teachers are taught interpersonal communication and listening to pupil skills.

Third question - why should school adopt such a complex system in which all school staff are partners?

Conducting a system of personal/private conversations in which all staff participate is very complicated and may even appear to be impossible. I argue that we cannot abandon it. In addition to the advantages presented so far, I will add an argument with regard to the educational climate at schools. Studies have found that intimate meetings and fruitful dialogue between teachers and pupils and between pupils themselves do have an effect (over and above learning achievements) on changing

a school climate, reduction in the level of violence at school and strengthening relations between pupils and teachers. Consequently, schools make a supportive learning environment (optimal learning climate) possible for their pupils that allows every pupil to progress according to the learning-educational continuum both in their classes, transition from class to class as well as transition from elementary to high school education (Erhardt, 2001). An optimal educational climate is always a goal for the Ministry of Education. Schools invest in many and varied educational programs in order to reach the coveted goal. On the basis of the theoretical literature I presented in this article and my experience in the field, I will argue that personal conversations between the entire school staff and pupils are the first tool to be employed in order to optimize the educational climate in schools.

Fourth question - so how is this done and when?

In previous sections of this article, I have tried to answer the questions, what to do? Why should it be done? Who will do it? In this section, I will refer to two questions, which are in fact the million dollar questions: how and when? How are emotional conversations, in which the entire school team and all pupils take part conducted? And when? Elementary schools in Israel usually devote a certain day of the week to meetings and pedagogic workshops, on this day the entire teaching staff is present at school and available to attend a staff meeting during afternoon hours. I propose that this day be devoted as well to emotional discourse between teachers and pupils in the following way: in a school system, all teachers and pupils will complete their work at the same time. At the end of day, before staff meetings, an hour of school staff time (will appear in each teacher's timetable) will be devoted to conducting personal/private conversations with pupils. Every teacher, whether homeroom or subject teacher, will advise pupils from their classes at the beginning of the week (will send a letter to parents) and will invite once a week up to three pupils for a **'heart to heart conversation'** on a regular day at a prearranged time. Every teacher at school will follow up and make notes so that they will have met with all their pupils. Subject teachers who teach in a number of classes will invite pupils according to need. Subject teachers should coordinate their work so as to ensure that every pupil will meet at least one subject teacher who teaches their class every year. Homeroom teachers must meet each pupil in their class at least twice a year. The first half of the conversation should address getting to know and coordinating expectations and the second half as follow up or summing up the year. In order to create meaningful encounters, it is recommended to devote at least 15 minutes to the meeting and it should be structured: opening, body and conclusion. Seeing that all pupils will be aware of the hour devoted to heart to heart conversations, there is a possibility that they will choose the subject about which they want to talk to their teachers, and will even request a personal conversation with their homeroom or one of their subject teachers.

Heart to heart conversations can be accompanied by cards....drawing any way that suits teachers and can reach pupils' hearts. These encounters can take place in classroom or elsewhere at school - as chosen by individual teachers and pupils.

5. Conclusion

This article presents an argument regarding the importance of personal conversations between members of school staff and their pupils, as a tool for emotional availability for learning and study success in the micro and creation of an optimal educational climate in the macro.

Examining reality in the field indicates the system's weakness expressed in principals and teachers' burdens in organization individual hours and control over their execution together with the need to carry out arranged personal/private meetings between teachers and their pupils. In addition the clear distinction between homeroom and subject teachers regarding dealing with pupils' issues.

Moreover, teachers report that they lack tools and skills to conduct emotional discourse that is likely to be interpreted as a threat to their professionalism. Teachers are likely to be exposed to emotional, social difficulties for which they may not always have the means to care.

The literature review indicated the strengths hidden in personal discourse between teachers and pupils to improve their relationships and provide a response to basic needs of school pupils. The 'New Horizon' reform presents an excellent opportunity for a different significant dialogue between teachers and pupils (from that in the classroom).

Pupils will gain a different relationship with their teachers, as adults in general and representative of the education system in particular. Teachers, too, will be able to experience emotional dialogue or use different skills from those they present in class. Participation of all members of staff in emotional personal discourse with pupils is likely to make subject teachers more significant for their pupils, for their colleagues, and of course, for themselves.

My proposal is a model that can be implemented in every school. Of course every school can take this model and accentuate what reflects its school policy. However, personal encounters between teachers and pupils must never be waived. This does not mean that discourse between pupils and teachers will only take place once or twice a year. Teachers' educational work with their pupils will continue to exist in the classroom, parent meetings, social activities and even.... during breaks. Just the opposite, a policy of heart to heart conversations will create a language of discourse at school. Every pupil will know the place and time that a teacher will listen to him/her and just him/her. Even those pupils who are quiet during the week and do not fight for the place and maybe because of this disappear a little will get a place. Teachers can be pleasantly surprised by new discoveries about their pupils and even more than this from their pupils' desire to participate in personal/private conversations, from the sense of satisfaction that will accompany them in their work and the appreciation they will get from their parents.

In order to get to the desired goal: optimal educational climate, one must refer as well to social encounters in small groups managed by teachers. As such pupils will become experienced in social skills in different small group frameworks according to teachers' judgment.

Learning assistance, social encounters and personal/private heart to heart conversations within the framework of individual hours are tools that have existed in Israeli elementary school since the start of the 'New Horizon' reform. All that is needed is to better understand the possibilities hidden therein and manage them correctly. Correct management is likely to lead school to the coveted goal: optimal

educational climate, to enable pupils to emotionally apply to learning and from here, there is no limit to success.

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