

## Safety of educational environment: psychological and pedagogical aspects

## Sicurezza dell'ambiente educativo: aspetti psicologici e pedagogici

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The article is devoted to the concept of the psychologically safe educational environment. Methodological and the theoretical bases of psychological safety of educational environment are presented.

A particular attention is devoted to the impact of this construct on communication between peers.

The article suggests criteria to evaluate psychological safety and ways of its organization.

*L'articolo affronta il tema della sicurezza psicologica nell'ambiente educativo, presentandone le basi teoretiche e metodologiche.*

*Il concetto di sicurezza psicologica viene esaminato considerando le modalità organizzative che consentono di ottenere un ambiente sicuro e i criteri che ne consentono la valutazione, con particolare attenzione al problema della comunicazione tra pari.*

**Key words:** the educational environment, psychological safety, personal development, pedagogical interaction, peer interaction.

**Parole chiave:** ambiente educativo, sicurezza psicologica, sviluppo personale, interazione educativa, interazione fra pari

## Safety of educational environment: psychological and pedagogical aspects

In the last 10 years the term «safety» has become one of the most important terms in almost all spheres of life of modern man. In education it is the main criteria for the successful educational process, for its integrity and consistency, as well as to develop a humanistic, learner-oriented and comfortable educational environment for children.

Educational institution (kindergarten, school, liceum and etc.) is the main social environment for children. Such competences as tolerance towards other people, ability to live with people of different cultures and nations, responsibility for one own's actions, ability to take part in cooperative decisions, to regulate conflicts without violence, are formed there.

But at the same time the educational environment of educational institutions can be dangerous for children and may contain risks and threats for their physical and psychological health. Safety absence in an educational environment has a negative influence on the successful development of the child's personality and his self-actualization.

A child does not always understand the level of danger, or does not know how to cope with the existing threat. Threats, dangers may come from nature (the elements, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, mudslides, etc.), from the material world (gas explosions in the house, cut glass, the risk of material objects – old houses, damaged furniture, etc.), from other people (adults, parents, teachers, peers in a social environment, students), from himself. That's why there is a need in a specific pedagogic activity and pedagogical protection for children.

In psychology such category as “safety” has been used since the 1920s.

According to the concepts of humanistic psychology (Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and others), the desire for security is one of the vital human needs. Maslow highlights the need for security as one of the basic human needs: humans desire to feel safe, get rid of fear and life misfortune [10].

Fromm [5] said that freedom from cruel social, political, economical and religious limitations has demanded a compensation in the form of feeling safe and being belonging to society. He supposed that this gap between freedom and safety had become the reason of difficulties in human being.

Horney [11] in social-cultural theory of personality marked 2 childhood needs: satisfaction need and safety need. In a child's development the main need is a safety need (being loved and protected from danger and hostile world). And when it is not satisfied, the basic hostility evolves. As a result, child feels fear, helplessness and guilt that appear in interaction with other people in present and in the future.

In 1970s the term “psychological safety” appeared in industrial and engineer psychology. It was connected with “patterns of human activity in situations of physical danger and the ways of searching assurance of one own's safety” [Kotik M., 5]

In last 15 years this term is connected with organizational psychology. Edmondson, A. [6] points out that psychological safety is a shared belief that the context is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respect-

ed. Also, psychological safety is defined by how group members think they are viewed by others in the group, but trust is defined by how one views another. So, they place an emphasis on the fact, that psychological safety is focused on being respected by the referential group [7].

Psychological safety is an integrative term [11], so it can be viewed:

- *as a process*. Every time the participants of the social environment meet each other, the psychological safety evolves anew;
- *as a condition* that provides basic protection and safety of personality and society;
- *as a characteristic* of one's own personality. It characterizes its protection of destructive influences and inner resource for resistance to harmful actions.

The term “safe learning environment” in the psychological-pedagogical science and practice appeared relatively recently.

When the development of a child is healthy, he feels confident and has a psychological resistance to difficult situations. But when a child does not believe in the success of his own actions, has fear of humiliation or feeling of loss of parent's love – all this means that the child's need in safety and protection are not satisfied. In this case the development of personality can be slowed down. Therefore, a teacher should organize such environment, which helps children satisfy the basic need in safety, teaches how to cope with difficult situations and shows his own way to achieve inner stability.

The elaboration of the concept of psychological and pedagogical safety of educational environment is based on certain concepts: danger, safety, threats, risks, challenges, educational institution, educational environment.

Yasvin asserts that *educational environment* is a system of influences and conditions for personality formation according to a given sample, as well as opportunities for its development, which are contained in the social and spatial-objective environment. [13]

But what are the differences between danger, risk and threat in this concept?

*Danger* is a probability of being harmed that is determined by objective and subjective factors.

*Risk* is a probability of upraise of negative consequences of a person's own activity.

*Threat* is a complex of conditions and factors that endanger the vital interests of the individual, society and state.

The Institution of developmental physiology of the Russian Educational Academy found out the main risk factors at school:

1. Stressful teaching tactics;
2. Mismatch of learning methods and technologies to the age and functional abilities of students;
3. Inadequate literacy of parents in the sphere of health of their children;
4. Very intensive educational process;
5. Premature preschool systematic training;
6. Functional illiteracy of teachers in matters of protection and promotion of health;

Medical, psychological and pedagogical practices show that a large number of students are in a state of chronic fatigue, which leads to neuro-psychological exhaustion. Moreover, many researches have shown that pedagogical errors or incorrect pedagogical technologies have negative effect on a child's mind. This leads to psychological maladjustment, which has such consequences as

- Low level of cognitive activity;
- Low level of motivation in the learning activity;
- Instability of the emotional sphere;
- A high level of anxiety;
- Aborted communication skills.

Psychologically safe educational environment helps to avoid such psychological maladjustment.

Methodological and theoretical base of psychological safety of the educational environment is presented by Baeva (the professor of Herzen State Pedagogical University, Saint Petersburg, Russia)

Baeva [3,11] considers psychologically safe environment as such environment, where the majority of participants (students, teachers and parents) have a positive attitude towards it, have high satisfaction index of interaction and protection from psychological abuse.

Ter-Akopov [12] offers a broader definition of psychological safety. According to his ideas, it is such internal state, that's characterized by the absence of danger for the psyche of the person, and includes a complex of specific actions for elimination such danger.

Mirimanova [8] points out that psychological safety of modern educational environment is directly related to the conflict and proneness to conflict in this educational space. The conflict can be either a factor of development of personality, or a factor of psychological safety/unsafety. School conflicts, especially in adolescence, are associated with violence, aggression, and take various forms: insults, accusations, threats, shouting, quarrelling, fighting, revenge, etc. Also conflicts are accompanied by strong emotional experience, which leads to certain strategies of behaviour. Non-constructive conflict leads to psychological violence and brings down the index of psychological safety. Psycho prophylaxis of these conflicts, risks and threats can be one of the most important grounds for modelling psychologically safe educational environment.

Psychological safety is also an indicator of the effectiveness of the entire educational institution. But understanding psychological safety as one of the ways of pedagogical work is not quite correct. Psychological safety is possible only when all the activities of the educational institutions are solved efficiently, then there will be a psychologically safe environment and sense of comfort for all its participants.

The category of psychological safety is determined by Baeva [1, 3, 11] in 3 aspects:

- As a condition of educational environment that is free from psychological violence in interaction, that proves satisfaction of need in personal trustful communication, that has referential meaning and support mental health of its participants.
- As a system of interpersonal relationships, which gives the participants a sense of belonging (the reference value of the environment), convinces a man that he is out of danger and strengthens his mental health.
- As a system of measures to prevent threats for productive development of personality.

Today some of the researchers, regarding the influence of the processes of the social environment on man, maintain such type of communication as intrapersonal communication. Baeva [3,4] claim that intrapersonal communication is one of the positive results of human mental development, that shows the rate of his personal growth.

They propose to consider intrapersonal communication as a possible indicator of the development of personality in the educational environment. Effective intrapersonal communication, which leads to self-actualization, is possible only in psychologically safe environment.

**The criteria of safety of the educational environment are:**

- Satisfaction of the educational process;
- Comfort of the educational environment;
- Psycho-social and legal defence of all participants of the educational process at all levels;
- Understanding that the child is a subject of his own development;
- Psychological and pedagogical culture of teachers, staff, administration of the educational institution;
- Social creativity of students as a condition of positive socialization;
- The well formed, objective assessment and self-assessment by all participants of the educational environment in an atmosphere of care, protection, well-being and freedom of choice in activities and communication.

But the three main criteria of psychological safety are: absence of psychological violence in interaction, satisfaction of need in personal trustful communication and referential meaning of this environment, that supports mental health its participants.

**Pedagogical safety** of educational environment is a system of pedagogical techniques, which helps to organize environment free from threats to physical and mental health of its participants (first of all, students and teachers)

Kovrov [8] supposes that school is a stress-producing area, because, in fact, everything is regulated and determined there by special rules, and its participants have few variables of behaviour within these limits. That's why it is necessary to give students and teachers a technology of safe interaction in violent educational space.

Educational environment – it's not only physical space of the educational institution (its physical state, color, design, organization, etc.), but it is also a relationship, as well as an activity of students and teachers in this environment. But if a teacher is too authoritarian, whether he is a wonderful teacher-master, his hard work algorithm will cause some problems in relationships and in a student's motivation. If a teacher is too humane it also will cause tension in the educational environment because in a short period of time teachers are obliged to give the big program of basic education to students. Learning becomes violent from the moment, when student realizes that the received information requires efforts to be stored, transmitted and assimilated. Most of students do not understand why they need to spend time and effort to assimilate completely unnecessary knowledge (in their opinion). Therefore, an optimal way of giving knowledge for students and teachers should be found.

Pedagogical protection can be made directly or take preventive forms.

*Direct pedagogical protection* is a system of actions, provided by teacher through intervention in difficult or dangerous situations for the child where there is a threat to life, health or mental-skills or when there is a need for immediate protection of the rights and dignity of a child. It is a cooperative activity of teacher and student to find a specific pathways to understand the situation and achieve such result, in which there is no need for external protection. In direct contact with the student, the teacher explains, directs the child to reflect on the dangers and finds ways to resolve the arising problem. Direct pedagogical protection in practice is carried out in cases of physical, mental violence, moral cruelty by immediate cessation of negative actions, involvement of the competent authorities, sending a child to a psychologist, a medical room or a physician specialist.

*Preventive pedagogical protection* is such methods in which a teacher resolves the dangerous and difficult situation without the direct intervention into it. Among preventive measures can be, for example, attraction of the child's parents to participate in class activities. Preventive

protection assumes the creation of safe environment in a team, that excludes possibility of being threatened by the peers in future.

The authors of the article made a research to find out an index of psychological safety at different schools [2]. The sample consisted of students of 12–15 years of age of four Moscow schools. Schools were divided into 2 groups: low index of psychological safety and high level of it.

We found out that at schools with low level of psychological safety, students' interactions with peers were ambivalent. On the one hand, there was freedom in communication and teenagers could express all their feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, there were tendencies to ignorance of the point of view of other people. Also there was a high index of demonstrative leadership. Students defended exclusively their own interests and showed aggressiveness in individual activity. Achievement of their own interests for them is more important than interpersonal relations. Very often students behavior was driven by negative emotions, insults, intentions to make harm to another teenager. Or they manipulated each other.

Such ambivalent behavior of students towards each other mirrors in students' images of educational environment. Teenagers thought that it is not psychologically safe, not comfortable, they didn't feel protected from psychological violence, but they have been satisfied by it already. We suppose that teachers there are inconsistent in their pedagogical methods. This leads to "double standard policy" in communication and establishing aggressiveness and hostility as a norm of behavior.

So, we can see that there exists psychological violence in interaction with peers which leads to reduce of the reference of educational environment.

Relations with teachers were also ambivalent. On the one hand, students said that there were trust, honesty and help in communication with adults. On the other hand, teenagers also pointed at such communication problems as aggressiveness, lack of understanding, warp judgment of teachers. These results could be connected, first of all, with professional deformation of teachers, and also with the fact that teachers can't keep pace with the extremely changing teenagers.

Lack of interesting upbringing activities with a strong pro-social orientation reduces students' satisfaction of the educational environment, and increases the expression of psychological violence, the aggressiveness and non-constructive conflicts in interaction.

At schools with low level of psychological safety students are not involved into the school life. They feel bored there and don't feel referential meaning of the school.

At schools with high level of psychological safety students were more involved into school life. Students name positive changes in their character and personality as an impact of the school. They pointed that their communicative skills, personality development, and self-confidence had grown.

Students described their relations with other students as trustful, authentic and full of freedom in self-expression. The level of conflict was low there, communication was very helpful and supportive. Students tried to listen to each other, to cooperate and were tolerant in interactions. The level of intergroup competition was very low there.

Students at these schools described their relationships with teachers as friendly and accepting. These relations were characterized by honesty, politeness; there were no negative evaluation of children personalities by teachers; they try to listen to the students' opinions. Adults do not try to change the teenager's personality in violent, prescriptive or authoritarian way, but show teenager's abilities and ways of his development. Students feel the unconditional acceptance from teachers, and feel their own right for being unique. And the motivation for study was high there.

But on the other hand teachers at that schools tend to pedagogical manipulations and students feel that. In pedagogical staff we found out a tendency to be guided in pedagogical actions not by desires of children's community, but by own representations what is necessary for teenagers.

We suppose that it is connected with a teachers' position in relations with students. In communication teachers present themselves as an embodiment of authority and knowledge. In this case there is no "head-to-head" relation with teenagers and in difficult situations (preparation to examination or for significant actions) and sometimes teenagers understand this behaviour as disrespect. One more reason is that teachers have in image of ideal students. But in attempt to comply with this ideal they forget about real students and can't keep pace with the extremely changing teenagers. At present, we consider such behaviour as a risk for psychological safety which, in case of continuation and stability of such behaviour from teachers, could develop into threat both for the psychological safety of school, and the stability of educational system as a whole.

So, we can see that psychologically safe environment has an impact on learning activity of students, on their personal development and self-actualization.

For achieving safety in educational environment the following tasks should be resolved:

- Organization of learner-centred education with a glance to the individual psycho-physiological and social abilities of students;
- The formation of the personal needs and professional guidance according to knowledge of individual characteristics and capabilities of students
- Health control and adaptation of students to educational institution;
- Organization of leisure, correctional and rehabilitation activities for students and teachers.
- Selection the optimal educational technologies, lesson plans with taking into account age, sex, psychological makeup, environment;
- Development of raw talents and creativity of every child, teen, youth, implementation of their aptitudes and abilities in various fields of human activity and communication
- Optimization of psychological circumstances of students and teachers.

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