

The importance of teacher's attitude for multifaceted educational experience transfer to students' personal and professional development

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Abstract

At present Latvian education system is implementing a shift towards competency-based learning to improve the quality of education. Teachers are the agents of this change, therefore, a question of ensuring the transfer of educational experiences is becoming increasingly important. The aim of the research is to explore the importance of attitude as one of the factors of teacher's professional competence and interrelationships between the transformative aspects of the acquired educational experience and personal and professional growth of the individual. A survey research design and a qualitative survey data analysis was employed. 530 respondents from different ethnical and professional backgrounds (Latvia, UK, and RSA) were selected using non-probability sampling, allowing gathering data on their educational journey and experience transfer. The outcomes demonstrate the link between the teacher's example and attitude and the learner's personal and professional growth, as well as shows the long-term emotional impact.

Keywords: Competence, Learner's growth, Quality of education, Teacher's attitude, Transfer

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1. Introduction

Quality of education has become one of the factors that influences the knowledge culture and innovations, in other words – sustainability and quality of life. Through education, information is transformed into knowledge, life takes on new perspectives, people get career opportunities, thus ensuring the path to new understandings and discoveries. The understanding of educational value, transferred by multiple educational experiences, has changed in all times, and continues to do so nowadays. It is declared as important to every person, family, society, and the country as a whole, as well as considered as a path to person's quality of life, development of a knowledge-based society and country's economic growth and well-being.

Along with the paradigm shift towards competency-based learning in the educational space of Latvia and promotion of quality education and its competitiveness in the local and global context, in the teaching profession particular attention is paid to the concepts “Europeanness” and “European dimension”, which have been employed to emphasize national and transnational values in educational policy development in the context of socio-political and cultural aspects of a particular member state. Moreover, the need for a national identity has been emphasized that serves as a basis for transnational awareness (Schratz, 2014).

These ideas have special relevance for the role of teachers as key agents of change and providers of high-quality pedagogical process ensuring the transfer of educational experiences. It is expected that teachers serve as role models for students, who acquire the competences that they deploy later. The perceptions and beliefs of educators strongly influence whether learners change their perception, behaviour, and attitudes. In other words, the model of teaching is highly influenced by teachers' personality traits, attitudes, professional practices, and acquired professional knowledge (Hartwig, Schwabe, 2018; Liakopoulou, 2011; Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007; Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler, 2000; etc.)

A social role of contemporary teachers does not stop in a classroom where they work with pupils more or less in isolation from other classes and teachers. Each teacher's work shapes the learning environment of the whole school, influencing the school's climate, ethos, and culture both directly and indirectly, as well as affecting the learners (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, 2005).

Therefore, there is an increasing emphasis on the need for teacher's competence, characterized by an integrative approach to the teacher's professional activity, which often is understood unconceptualized differently in various situations. The teacher's professional competence is regarded as a comprehensive, dynamic, and progressive concept associated with 21st-century skills (Paneru et al, 2017), which distinguishes five domains: 1) reflection and discourse, 2) professional awareness, 3) collaboration and collegiality, 4) ability to differentiate, and 5) personal mastery. Since, in pedagogical practice, these domains are often inseparable, also the sixth domain is distinguished, which integrates all five above mentioned domains into a coherent whole, thus ensuring a holistic view on teacher's competence (Schratz, 2014). This model includes the establishment and management of pedagogical relationships with students, placing them in the context of respect and mutual understanding, and it is rooted in a teaching model that includes emotional, subject, and pedagogical knowledge, which is topical for transformation of educational experience (Biesta, 2012; 2015; Blazar, Kraft, 2017; Pugh, Tyson, 2012; Zembylas, 2007). The teachers who are able to establish positive relationships with students and who are aware of students' needs, intellectual potential and interests, are regarded as honest, patient, supportive and caring (Liakopoulou, 2011).

The proposed topic has originated from our research and practice in the field of education, emphasizing the importance of teachers' attitude and pedagogical relationships between teachers and students as a key element penetrating the whole process of learning. In this context, teachers' attitudes can be defined as pedagogically significant subjective concepts, which affect both the teacher's perception of the educational environment and professional interaction with students, providing mutual and interactive climate for learning. Students should share the responsibility for their own learning, when moving from knowledge acquisition and improvement of skills onto attitudes. The previous studies confirm that it is affective and behavioural dimension of attitude, not the cognitive one, which reveal a prevailing positive attitude and readiness to create an accepting learning environment (Bethere, Pavitola, Ulmane-Ozolina, 2014; Bethere, Pavitola, Usca, 2016; 2021; Pavitola, Bethere, Usca, 2019).

Therefore, for ensuring a qualitative learning process, a multidimensional learning and teaching experience is needed, which includes not only the transfer of academic knowledge, but also teachers' social and emotional interactions with students, ability to organize and manage the classroom environment and provide an instructional support when delivering the learning content. Thus, the emphasis is on teacher's behaviour that, in turn, develops students' attitudes and behaviours (Blazar, Kraft, 2017; Hafen et al., 2015; Hamre et al., 2013; Pianta et al., 2012). Transfer of learning is regarded as one of the key concepts in education, and it is described as near or reflexive transfer, meaning closely related contexts, and as far or mindful transfer, meaning connected to different contexts and perspectives (Perkins, Salomon, 1988).

In this context, the issue of transformational learning becomes topical, which is based on qualitative changes in the knowledge acquisition process, instead of focusing of behavioural changes or increase in the body of knowledge. Keeping in mind the definition of learning put forward by J. Mezirow (2009), which defines learning as a process of using a prior knowledge and experience to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning, a transformational learning is a way of thinking that is inclusive and integrative, and open to alternative solutions. This facilitates a shift in values and attitudes of the individual and helps to develop a new understanding revealing the interactions with the environment (Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2017; Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler, 2000).

The theoretical framework of this study is based on three dimensions emphasized in transformative learning theory developed by J. Mezirow (2009): 1) the psychological dimension (how understanding education as a value changes a person's self-awareness), 2) the belief and attitude change dimension (how seeing education as a value alters people's perceptions, beliefs and attitudes), 3) and behavioural (lifestyle) change dimension (broadening the existing worldview and perspective on one's abilities and opportunities), recognizing and articulating one's own contribution to personal/communal/national well-being and economic growth.

1.1. Purpose of research

Theoretical findings point to the need for creative pedagogical strategies and tools that can establish the conditions for both near (reflective) and far (mindful) transfer and, what is even more significant, teaching for transfer. Therefore, the aim of the research is to explore the importance of attitude as one of the factors of teacher's professional competence and interrelationships between the transformative aspects of the acquired educational experience and personal and professional growth of the individual. The study seeks to provide a response to the following research question: how factors related to attitude promote the transformation of educational experience in the context of teacher-learner interaction and encourage shifts in values, attitudes, and understanding.

2. Methods

The research methodology is selected according to the qualitative research paradigm, and the overall strategy of the study is based on a holistic approach. For obtaining the research data, a survey research design and a qualitative cross-sectional survey data content-analysis was employed.

The survey was organized in a way that allowed the respondents to reflect on their own educational journey, analysing both positive and negative experiences, giving the respondents the freedom to reveal their thoughts, feelings and understanding. Besides statistical questions (gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, level of education), the survey had two yes/no questions, two multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions, where the respondents could describe their experience, tell their story. Google Forms were used to distribute the surveys online.

2.1. Participants

The sample of respondents was selected using non-probability convenience sampling. The sample consists of 530 respondents from different cultural, ethnic, and professional backgrounds, as well as different age groups and levels of education. The respondents are from three countries – Latvia, United Kingdom and Republic of South Africa, which makes the study transnational and even transcontinental; the age of respondents –18 to 80, and 65% of respondents have higher education.

2.2. Analysis

The data collected from surveys are analysed using descriptive content analysis that summarize the information gathered with respect to the research question and allow to draw meaningful conclusions. The content analysis is based on three dimensions of J. Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory: psychological dimension, belief and attitude dimension, and behavioural dimension. According to these dimensions, the initial codes or keywords were chosen to organize the collected data into themes, revealing the transformative element of educational value and learning: teachers' attitude (respect and care), educational experience (learning journey), and personal and professional development.

2.3. Data collection instrument

Since a survey allows gathering data from a large sample size or research population, it helps to ensure the validity of research findings that can be generalized to a wider population as the responses clearly state the links between educational experiences, person's well-being and change of attitudes and behaviour. This goes hand in hand with research studies, that emphasize the significance of a high level of self-awareness, being aware of the meaning of life, one's own place in the world and the role to be played in preserving this world, as well as shows organic interaction with the learning environment stressing the importance of an active attitude which turns ideals into reality (Maykova et al., 2018).

The study presents obtained data and in-depth information about underlying values and attitudes of individuals in the context of educational experience transfer and its application in educational, social, and cultural contexts. However, there are some limitations of the study: in the surveying process, it was not possible to observe the attitudes of the respondents, and the collected data refer to a single point in time, described by respondents through educational experiences that have left prints carried along in their life journeys.

3. Findings

The study explores the importance of teachers' attitude and the factors promoting the transformation of educational experience by encouraging shifts in values, attitudes, and understandings in the context of teacher-student interaction. In this respect, concerns were also expressed about the issues of transformative aspects of the acquired educational experience and personal and professional growth of the individual. Based on the methodology of the research, the findings were analysed according to the chosen keywords: teachers' attitude (including respect and care), educational experience (learning journey), and personal and professional development.

3.1. Teacher's attitude

When the respondents were asked – 'When you reflect on your years at school/ university, can you remember a teacher/lecturer who sticks out in your memory as having been someone special or who you remember with gratitude, or from who you have learned a lot?', one of the keywords that stand out in most responses is – **respect** in its various forms. The teacher is remembered because he/she treated his/her students with respect, or on contrary, because there was a lack of respect in the pedagogical relationships. The responses clearly show that both positive and negative feelings from the learning journey have influenced lives, career choices, relationships with other people.

The respondents remember their teachers because they treated them with respect despite their young age or the level of knowledge (*Teacher respected us even we were just small kids// Everyone felt special in her presence// Teacher saw personality in everyone despite our level of knowledge*); respected opinion (*She never treated my ideas as less important even I was only a 1st year student*); showed respect through encouragement and patience (*Teacher never humiliated anybody, instead – encouraged to try again, including those who had weak academic results// She pointed at mistakes in work, but not in the person// She always patiently explained everything and never lifted her voice to get discipline*). Teacher taught with respect, treated pupils with respect and, and taught to treat others with respect.

Some respondents emphasized the importance of believing in students' abilities, which resulted in strengthening of their self-esteem and positive personality development (*I was a talented pupil, but in my teenage years I started to do some naughty things and became lazy. Many teachers had "written me off" and their prognosis was that I will "fully step off the road", but my German language teacher believed in me and made a great effort, that I would develop my abilities and work more diligently. Her efforts did not go in vain and her belief in goodness brought good fruits. 12 years later, after graduating from university, I returned to my native school as a teacher// Teacher expressed love towards the children and teaching// Encouraged children to believe in themselves, praised their initiatives// Uplifted my self-esteem// In high-school our English teacher started to address all pupils as Mr and Miss – that uplifted our self-esteem*).

As illustrated above, experiencing respect in pedagogical relations results in a raise in self-esteem, promotes positivity and positive attitudes in the learners, raises motivation for learning. On the other hand, experiencing lack of respect lowers self-esteem, contributes to insensitivity, involves various forms of bullying and diminish the motivation to learn.

Also lack of respect takes various forms and expression: lack of patience (*My teacher did not have any patience and did not allow us to ask questions or make suggestions about the work*); inappropriate comments that result in lowering one's self esteem (*I was not great at reading aloud and I remember a specific incident where he laughed at my pronunciation of a word, which made all other pupils laugh as well – I don't think it impacted my future but it did cause me embarrassment and possibly lowered*

my self-esteem, and this situation I will not forget// Teacher always picked on me and I remain convinced she disliked me – that seriously affected my confidence level); insensitivity in judgement – inability to sense larger problem issues (I'd written a composition which I was very proud of and then I received it back with a red line scribbled across and a comment of "what is this all about". I suppose it was all hogwash, but I was going through a difficult stage of life which didn't make much sense and I tried to express myself in ambiguous way without exposing that the story was actually about me// In Gr 2 the school's medical sister discovered that my hearing is not what it supposed to be, after which I went for several ear operations. But before this, I was always sitting in class with tins on my ears because I "didn't listen in class", as well as package tape on my mouth because I was afraid to ask the teacher what to do, and asked my friends instead, so the teacher labelled me as a terribly naughty child because I was always talking and did not listen in class, which also resulted in having a stomach ulcer. Not a nice year at all// My Math teacher repeatedly called me 'illiterate' both individually and in front of the class, and it strongly impacted my motivation to learn).

Many respondents stressed the consequences of their experience, when lack of respect was expressed in a form of screaming and shouting or in different other forms of bullying (*My primary school teacher shouted a lot – he would scream at the children in his class so that one could hear it miles away – it was very scary and so disrespectful// Teacher was a bully who misused his position of authority// Grade 1 teacher – screamed and yelled, I lost self-belief and failed during the whole year*). There are also memories of experiencing humiliation, such as being thrown at with some objects, or physical punishments, even caning (*I remember Mr. G. for caning me 18 times (3 x 6) in one day. My bum was bleeding, I couldn't sit for a couple of days. I hope he rots in hell// I couldn't do Maths and the teacher we had was always throwing the board wiper at me!!*). Lack of respect results also in injustice towards students (*Teacher was angry and isolated me in an aggressive attack for something I was not guilty of*), and many other examples.

3.2. Educational experience

The survey also revealed interrelations between the teachers' professional activity, including their attitude and personality traits, and the educational journey of learners. The responses implied that teacher's attitude allowed to understand better the learning subject (*I did not understand Math at all until we got this teacher// In secondary school I attended English just because I had to, but in high school teacher made lessons so interesting that it became my favourite subject. I am grateful to her for her work and patience// With her patience, my Math teacher not only managed to accomplish that I passed the exam, but also that I developed liking towards her subject, which previously only caused feelings of disgust// The lecturer in Theatre history was a senior person, but she surprised us each time not only with her knowledge but also with her wisdom// I did not like Biology, but I respected the teacher for her strict but honest attitude towards us*). On the other hand, negative attitudes caused negative results (*The negativity of the lecturer made me lose interest in the subject*), but fear became a reason for losing motivation to learn (*My Math teacher taught me fear, not Math// Music teacher planted in me terrible fear - still my voice trembles when I sing*). Also, a stereotypical attitude of teachers is regarded as hurtful by respondents (*Negative attitude from the teacher, disbelief in me killed the desire to continue my studies in the chosen profession – the teacher said that in this profession one must be beautiful and a male. Nevertheless, currently I am successfully working in this profession.*)

Many respondents described how they were affected by teacher's personal example, which in long run has shaped their personalities (*He taught me respect for music, for the stage, revealed different*

philosophy of life; he could change things around us just with his presence and example even without saying a word// She was strict, just, encouraged to take initiative and engage in different activities – she taught with her personality and personal example// As professor he was strict and demanding, but this fine ability to lead a student towards development and growth, remaining sufficiently demanding, is my ideal. I am trying to implement it in my work with the students and I hope I am succeeding). The teachers are also remembered for their wisdom of heart, sense of responsibility, just attitude and strictness, and for the inner power and strength (*It made me respect the teacher and desire to be like her (lecturer). It was a shame to go to her class unprepared// I use the same methods for establishing order in my class as my teacher// My teacher was understanding and kind – even when I was not too good in her subject// Discipline in our class was not out of fear, but out of respect for this teacher*), which has helped to develop some good habits and positive attitude towards life.

3.3. Personal and professional development

The teacher's example, attitude and personality traits have influenced career choices and professional development of many respondents – both in positive and negative ways (*I had a truly awful History teacher when I studied first two years in high school. He was aggressive and dismissive, particularly towards female students. His approach was simply to bombard us with facts and figures; he did not seem interested in engaging us with what is actually a very interesting subject. Because of him, I did not continue with History as a subject in high school. Many years later - during the course of my doctoral studies - I discovered a love for history and deeply regret that I did not take it as a subject during school and during my undergraduate studies at university// After the first Algebra lesson in high school, I decided to become a teacher because I really liked the teaching style of my teacher*). These are just a few examples.

When describing the learnings from their educational journey, only a few of them are directly related to a particular learning subject. From the responses it becomes clear that negative experiences can bear a long-term hurt and that it takes a long time to heal, but if one manages to overcome them, the personality gets strengthened (*Teacher always picked on me and I remain convinced that she disliked me – that seriously affected my confidence level// In high school there was this History teacher (male) who always used every opportunity to humiliate students through making jokes in front of the other kids, and generally he encouraged the other learners to pick on me: because of him my high school years was hell. I ended up as a very reserved person that never raised my eyes from the floor and always sat in the back of the classroom with my face in a book (avoiding everyone). After years of therapy, I was able to overcome my fear from people and start living my life again. It has made me a very 'hard' and unforgiving person. I don't give anybody the opportunity to walk all over me*). The respondents reflected on different life-lessons learnt that reach deeper levels of being, personality development or understanding of values. I learnt: *the ability to think independently and creatively and to be accountable for my own work// to be patient and keep trying even if it does not come right on the first time. One always must strive to reach the goal// patience, compassion, kindness, and respect towards another person// to overcome difficulties// sense of responsibility and values of life// to rejoice about success of others// to express loud my thoughts// skill to present oneself// wisdom of life, nice moments together, laughing and talking// never be afraid to strive for your goals!* And a few more examples which prove the long-lasting impact of a teacher's work: *I still remember some practical advice from my G 4-8 teacher – how to put money in a wallet// Class teacher taught me to be myself, on the same level with others// My handwriting now is similar to the one of my primary school teachers.*

4. Discussion

The focus of the study was to explore the importance of teachers' attitude as one of the key elements in understanding the dimensions of professional competence and the effect of transformational learning promoting personal and professional growth of the individual in terms of values, attitudes, and understandings. Education proves its value not only through obtained knowledge, but also through person's ability to think and critically evaluate opinions and social processes, willingness to engage in social processes, desire to get to know and understand other people and contribute to their spiritual and economic wellbeing and growth. It is important that young professionals, after graduating from university and working in their specialties, are skilled not only in their chosen subject, but also develop as tolerant, socially intelligent and diversity minded personalities. Most importantly, the value of education must be consciously recognized so that transformative experiences can take place leading to spiritual and economic growth of social community.

The theoretical and empirical data of this study proves the importance of using integrative approach for addressing the components of teacher's professional competence. Along with the aspects that include emotional, subject, and pedagogical knowledge, the teacher's attitude and interrelationships with the learners are the most significant factors influencing the quality of education and providing the basis for transformative educational experiences. This demands qualitative change in a way of knowing, helping an individual to become aware of his or her "self", which gives an opportunity to achieve self-actualization.

Regarding the research question that was put forward, the outcomes of this study demonstrate the importance of the teacher's example, attitude and positive interaction with students. It was emphasized and considered as crucial by almost all respondents, regardless their country of schooling, ethnicity, race, or gender. Transformative educational experiences occur in all three dimensions defined by Mezirow (2009) – psychological, beliefs and attitudes, as well as behavioural, as it was illustrated by above mentioned examples. Some of the dimensions highlighted by the respondents are the following: respect for learners, belief in the learners' abilities, positivity, justice and humane attitude, trustworthiness, understanding and forgiveness, ability to care, encouragement, charismatic personality, compassion, congruence (when words correspond with the deeds), wisdom of heart, etc.

4. Conclusion

For several respondents it was their teacher's example that motivated them to become teachers. Interestingly, lots of hurtful experiences were described from the primary level of education, indicating that at this age children do not know how to deal with negative comments and how to build resistance. Hurtful experiences stay with learners for a long time, and without a question, there is no place for physical punishment in a contemporary school.

Summarizing the findings, it can be concluded that the educational environment and experiences, which depend on teacher's professional awareness and personal mastery, and which are called to life by teacher's example, attitude and ability to develop positive pedagogical relationships as well as ability to choose appropriate teaching approaches in the learning process, are closely related to personal and professional development of the learner and the quality of education in general. This is an important aspect, which is also linked to understanding education as the value and to socialization of an individual that is characterized by integration of educational elements into any other activity related to the knowledge transfer and the development of specific skills and abilities. Thus, the

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theoretical and empirical findings of this study should desirably be included in the content of in-service teacher education programmes to ensure the transformational aspect of teaching.

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