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National research report on learning space and teachers' competence in Latvia

Primary schools

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14 schools from the regions of Riga and Latvia participated in the study evaluating primary schools' learning environment. The study was carried out during lessons in primary school classrooms where there are children aged up to 11. The Marzano Teacher Evaluation Protocol was used for the analysis of the pedagogical work performed by primary school teachers.

1. Routine strategies evaluation

A. Communicating Learning Goals and Feedback

During the lessons, it was observed that teachers precisely define goals and acknowledge students' achievements by evaluating them using marks and showing support using praise. According to Cabinet Regulation No. 468 'Regulations Regarding the State Standard in Basic Education, the Subjects of Study Standards in Basic Education and Model Basic Educational Programmes', academic results of an educatee in grade 1 shall be evaluated descriptively. It shall be a brief oral and written evaluation regarding the learning activity, learning style, communication and co-operation abilities, attitude towards learning and the dynamics of development of the educational achievements of an educatee [1]. Educatees in grade 2 in the subjects of Latvian Language and Mathematics shall be evaluated on a scale of 10 points, but in the rest of the subjects descriptively; educatees in grade 3 in the subjects of Latvian Language, Mathematics and Foreign Language shall be evaluated on a scale of 10 points, but in the rest of the subjects descriptively, whereas, starting from grade 4, educatees are evaluated on a scale of 10 points in all subjects [1]. In Latvia, it is planned to implement the competence approach to education (from nursery to secondary school), which would offer students the knowledge, skills and attitude necessary in the 21st century. Starting from September 2020, all primary schools in Latvia will implement gradual changes in the study content and pedagogical approach in accordance with the improved standard in basic education which regulates what children learn from grade 1 to 9 and how [2]. The new competence education will also have a different evaluation system. How can marks help children and their parents – is one of the most complicated questions in the evaluation system. The new evaluation system highly values students' competence as a result of studying [3]. Until now, the main focus was on evaluating students' knowledge, paying less attention to skills and attitude, which also have a very important role in the study process. The main goal is for students to enjoy learning and to receive an evaluation of their studying, work and effort invested, not only of the amount of knowledge they have acquired.

B. Establishing and Maintaining Goals and Feedback

The teachers' initiative to make the classrooms' space and objects attractive to children is highly valued, and it was also observed that each classroom has certain rules for etiquette and behaviour. In Latvia, Cabinet Regulation No. 1338 'Procedures for the Provision of Safety of the Educatees in Educational Institutions and Events Organised by Them' [4] is used to establish internal regulations in each school. These regulations define the rights and obligations of students while they are at school. The regulations require the non-use of physical and emotional violence, to comply with etiquette when interacting with others, as well as to be responsible while using school inventory and being in the school's premises. The internal regulations of many schools also set rules for using cellular phones – usually it is not allowed during lessons but allowed during breaks or emergencies.

The layout of classrooms is very pleasant and encourages learning. The classrooms are spacious, the walls have different educational posters on them (containing, for example, letters in cursive).

In 7 of the schools students successfully worked in small groups; it was observable that group work in these schools is a customary part of the educational process. This is in harmony with the soon-to-be-implemented competence approach, where cooperation between students is essential. Work in pairs was also effective.

2. Content Strategies

C. Helping Students Interact with New Knowledge

During the study, it was found that the most difficult task for teachers was introducing students to purposeful study content. Teachers struggled with presenting the study content in a way that each student in the classroom would fully understand it. This is a difficult goal to achieve, if the knowledge is presented to students in an already processed form, for example, by telling or dictating, then organising a test that determines how successfully the students can replicate knowledge. Often the newly presented knowledge is not connected to real-life situations, with students not understanding the purpose of studying the offered material. The newly presented study content only becomes purposeful for a student, if it has a practical application, if the student knows where it can be applied in everyday life. When introducing a new topic, a number of teachers used the brainstorming method, with students actively participating in the exchange of opinions: positive reactions were observed in cases when the opinions were different. This aspect is important for effective communication and tolerance of different

views, which is encouraged by the teachers' professional pedagogical approach, which was showcased when all of the teachers supported situations of very different opinions; in this way, students understood that each of them has the right to voice their ideas and opinions on a topic, and that they should respect the choices of others.

The results in promoting co-operation between students during the learning of new content were much higher. It can be concluded that some elements of the new competence approach are already implemented in a number of schools and that the approach has proven to be effective for learning new study content. A positive, supportive environment and the process of socialisation help students to learn, because then they are also learning by listening to the experience of others. This is improving co-operative skills, which are essential in the full duration of the study process and after that entering the labour market. It is important to transition from a direct knowledge transfer to acquiring new knowledge by co-operating in pairs or groups, which is already successfully practised in a number of schools.

Teachers very effectively supported the interpretation of new information. In a number of schools, students made their own notes and then used the written down information when making posters or presentations in groups. Posters and presentations allow for an effective evaluation of students' knowledge and show whether there is a purposeful understanding of the content of the new topic. This approach shows what students understand fully, as well as gives an idea of what the next study tasks should be, which can be effectively developed by asking purposeful questions.

D. Helping Students Practice and Deepen New Knowledge

In primary school classrooms students work in groups a lot, which is very useful for refreshing the already acquired knowledge. Group work is a part of active learning, especially when there is an exchange of thoughts on an already familiar topic between the students. During group work, students also acquire listening skills, which is an important prerequisite for effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making, which are all highly valued in Latvian schools. During observations, teachers made an effort to indirectly participate in group work, whereas students were able to listen to each other and make a decision that would provide an answer to a previously posed question. The organisation of work during lessons allows one to conclude that, for group work in a primary school, the process is most important and not the result, because, naturally, with effective co-operation, there will be positive results.

Homework is one of the tools that help students to better understand and acquire a study topic. The laws and regulations in Latvia do not regulate the amount of homework given to

students; it is for teachers to decide what kind of homework to assign and how much. Recently there have been discussions in Latvia's society both on the amount of homework and its purposefulness, with many parents criticising the amount of homework for being too large and that it noticeably increases the students' study load. The discussions also propose that the new competence approach should ensure that homework lessens the study load for students. The main goals of homework are: to provide feedback, to develop the ability to plan and work independently, to improve students' strengths in a particular study subject, to supplement and retain what has been already learnt during lessons, as well as to observe and evaluate the students' ability to memorise, understand and use knowledge [5]. Overall, it can be concluded that the purpose of homework in Latvia's schools is not only the acquiring and retaining of knowledge, but that homework also plays an important role in developing the students' personal traits (for example, independence, determination, etc.).

E. Helping Students Generate and Test Hypotheses About New Knowledge

It was observed that primary school teachers effectively involved students in completing more difficult tasks that involve proposing a simple hypothesis and then testing its accuracy (for example, in science lessons). The learning process uses both experiments and the development of research skills in problem-based studies.

A number of schools have already successfully started implementing the competence-based approach to education. In this way, the pedagogical process is being carried out by using these principles:

- transition from the overly used passive learning and memorising of fact-based material to an active cognition process led by a teacher, self-expression and creativity;
- the connecting of study content with real-life situations;
- interdisciplinary approach that prevents the fragmentation of study content and encourages co-operation between teachers when organising the study process;
- provision of opportunities for students to learn in depth, find interconnections, and to develop an ability to apply knowledge to new, unknown situations [6].

During the cognition process, knowledgeable teachers provided the necessary support by encouraging students and helping them to understand the study content's connection to real life.

3. Strategies enacted in the spot

F. Engaging Students

One of the most important prerequisites for effective learning in a primary school is a positive and respectful environment in the classroom. A favourable atmosphere in the classroom helps students to participate in the learning activities and promotes a positive microclimate, whereas, a negative atmosphere makes students feel stressed and discourages them from participating in the learning activities. During the Soviet regime, teachers used an authoritarian approach and often raised their voice during lessons, which scared students and often accounted for their dislike towards learning in school. During our observations, we have found that the approach from the totalitarian regime is no longer used, and that teachers were helpful and open to solving the students' problems. The organisation of the pedagogical process in the observed lessons motivated students to actively participate in learning. In cases when students did not participate in learning, teachers made an effort to understand the reasons for it. The main reasons for this could be a lack of understanding of the study topic, as well as personal traits, such as insecurity when starting to learn new topics, and an insufficient level of development of co-operative skills. The teachers' effort to participate in students' problem-solving during both lessons and outside of them is highly valued.

During the transition towards a democratic society with a person and its necessities at the centre and where children are a value, schools transitioned too; their socio-emotional environment changed. Schools in Latvia started gradually highlighting students' well-being issues and creating a positive and responsive environment according to students' necessities.

Following the 'Latvia Fit for Children' Framework, which has been approved by Cabinet Direction No. 185 of 31 March 2004 'On the Latvia Fit for Children Framework', the Children and Family Affairs Ministry began the long-term project 'Child-friendly School' in 2005 [7].

The pedagogical process led by teachers is influenced by the values and work organisation style of the school as an institution. When creating a child-friendly school, it is important that the development process includes all of the school-life relevant aspects:

1) the school's environment,

2) the image of a teacher,

3) the image of an educatee,

4) the school's administration style,

5) the involvement of parents,

6) the learning process,

7) the co-operation between students, teachers, parents, school's administrators, as well as the co-operation with other institutions and municipalities [7].

Schools in Latvia have already successfully built a foundation for developing a positive socio-emotional environment, and the new competence approach will be an effective continuation to the successfully implemented approach necessary for the improvement and growth of each student.

G. Recognising Adherence to Rules and Procedures

The maintenance of discipline in classrooms has always been a topical issue. Rules in a classroom influence learning and its results. During lessons, teachers showed their professionalism by using different pedagogical methods for maintaining discipline. In the observed lessons, teachers instantly reacted to students breaching disciplinary rules, although they were not too obstructive, for example, talking to a classmate during the lesson, when it was not necessary. Adhering to rules is essential, because it helps students of primary school age to develop self-discipline and develops a habit to carry out duties, which is closely related to creating a sense of responsibility. Teachers reacted to breaches of rules with verbal directions without reproach, which was effective in each situation. In certain situations teachers offered students to assess their actions in connection to the unnecessary behaviour. It is worth mentioning that in all classrooms there was relatively good discipline, since the students had become accustomed to the rules during the academic year. The behavioural norms are defined by both the established classroom rules and the school's internal rules.

H. Establishing and Maintaining Effective Relationships with Students

The communication style of teachers in all of the observed classrooms was friendly, it showed that teachers understand students' interests, are familiar with students' personalities and make an effort to find an individual approach for each student, as much as it is possible during the lessons. The communication style of all teachers was democratic, it encouraged students to learn.

The 2018 Latvian schools' student and parent survey on the current learning experience offers the following conclusions:

1. Knowledge is no longer the only benefit students and their parents expect from school.

2. There are no useless study subjects – there should be a shift in focus on goals and approach. The elaboration of a study subject should accommodate students' interests.

3. The learning process should be connected to real life and involve students.

4. During learning, respectful and supportive relationships between students and teachers and a positive socio-emotional environment at the school are important.

5. Students and their parents have raised the necessity for enhanced personal support.

6. There is a wish to shift the focus on marks as study results to focus on evaluating students, as a means of providing support in everyday learning.

7. The satisfaction of students with school is higher overall when teachers help students to understand the importance of acquired knowledge in real life and purposefully support learning.

8. Parents' understanding of their role and readiness to participate in supporting their children's learning is very different [8].

These survey data are essential for a teacher working in a 21st century school and clearly show the directions of action that teachers will have to take.

I. *Communicating High Expectations for All Students*

In the observed lessons, teachers made an effort to assess and to show a supportive attitude towards students whose academic results are lower than the average indicators of the class. Teachers showed their support for struggling students with both verbal and non-verbal interaction. For non-verbal means of interaction, teachers used eye-contact and smiles which encouraged the students. Students with comparatively lower academic results are a challenge for teachers, since it requires a differentiated approach, and classes where there is a large number of students require a very thought-out and detailed lesson plan that does not allow for the negligence of students, with high academic results. The teachers' approach to creating a positive microclimate in the classroom is very highly valued: in the observed lessons, all teachers made an effort to value students with lower results to prevent them from developing low self-esteem, and in no case were there any negative comments on the academic results of students.

During lessons, teachers paid attention and ensured that every student would participate in classwork and asked students with all academic results, high, average and comparatively low, questions. Teachers effectively used group work, making each student participate in classwork, and promoting interaction between students, which helps them to learn new

concepts and retain already acquired knowledge. During group work, teachers proposed tasks that allowed each student to be successfully involved. It was observed that students willingly explained to each other what was not clear, and therefore strengthened their knowledge and helped students that were struggling to learn the new topic.

A currently topical issue in Latvia's education system is connected to the implementation of an inclusive education. The 2014-2020 framework for education development points out that 'although there is now a necessity for education systems to respond to diversity and to provide for the involvement of everyone in the education system, children and youth with special needs are not provided with sufficient support in acquiring education. The inclusion of persons with specials needs in the general education system shall be continued. In order to provide persons with special needs with the best possible support, it is essential to ensure that there is support personnel in general and vocational education institutions. Taking into account the increasing amount of general education school students with special needs, it is important that there is knowledge exchange between general and special education schoolteachers and their professional growth, which improves the understanding of persons with special needs' [9]. Latvia's education system is trying to provide growing support for students with special needs in order to include them in a general education school. In such cases, there is a necessity not only for teachers' understanding of students' needs, but also a supportive approach and an ability to motivate the students to learn.

Therefore, the teachers' approach to encourage perception of mistakes as a natural part of the study process was highly valued. In cases of incorrect answers, teachers made an effort to rephrase the question, as well as helped by using associations and different familiar situations for the students to find the correct answer by themselves. In this way, teachers encouraged the development of students' interest and motivation to learn, students did not feel discouraged and received positive support from teachers after correcting their mistakes. When implementing an inclusive education, teachers' professionalism is essential, because it helps create an emotionally fit environment, and the teachers' attitude is important for the acknowledgement of the diversity of students; it also helps to reduce the gap between students with and without special needs. The pedagogical work and support of a teacher is the one that makes up the psychological microclimate in a classroom. A favourable emotional environment in school encourages learning and is a prerequisite for effective socialisation.

Schools in Latvia are implementing different social inequality reduction measures. For example, one of them is the provision of students in grades 1-4 with free lunch. In this case,

the funding for this purpose is allocated from the state budget [10]. This support is essential for low-income and large families.

In conclusion, the observations made in Latvia's schools gave a positive impression of the organisation of the study process in a primary school. The beginning of implementation of the competence approach has proven to be successful and will provide students with knowledge relevant for the 21st century and co-operation skills, which are improved during group work in lessons. The teachers' effort to create a positive psychological microclimate in classrooms is highly valued, which is a very important prerequisite for the development of students' motivation to learn. An important role in the pedagogical process has also been allocated to different aspects of an inclusive education. The main focus of the pedagogical process is currently the connection of the study content with real life, since the competence approach requires the purposeful acquiring of knowledge where each educatee understands why he or she is learning the offered study content.

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