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## **Social Climate in the School Classes for Gifted Children Compared with Regular School Classes**

### **Abstract**

In this article we examine the results of the research on social climate in the school classes for gifted children in comparison with regular classes of the 1st stage elementary school. The research sample was made up by 36 children from 3 classes for gifted children and 73 pupils from regular classes. The research has proved some dissimilarity among monitored school classes as to how they perceive social climate evaluated by means of the questionnaire My Class Inventory. Gifted children have more difficulties in relationships, they are more competitive, less satisfied, and they feel to be burdened by learning than pupils from regular classes.

**Key words:** *classroom, social climate, gifted children.*

### **Theoretical analysis of the problem**

The inclusion of an individual in small groups has a meaningful share in his/her formation and in his/her psychical development. Such a group is also a school class into which a child is placed at the completion of his/her six years of age. The pedagogical process, however, does not only complete through influencing one pupil, therefore it is not enough to take into account an individual only, his/her personality, but we must think of the relations and dependence in his/her neighbourhood.

In the previous years, when the unified school was promoted in our school system, gifted children were not specifically considered. In recent years, in the context of humanization of our schools, gifted children have got into the focus of

interest of the professional public, too. Specific care of gifted children is also emphasized by the National programme of formation and education in the Slovak Republic for the following 15 to 20 years- MILÉNIUM (p.73). Thanks to numerous psychologists (Musil, M., Dočkal, V., Laznibatová, J.) as well as teachers willing to take part in those projects, there appeared the classes for gifted children at elementary schools, too; and this was an opportunity to also research their intellectual capacities and thinking specifics, personality characteristics, emotional and social characteristics. J. Laznibatová (2001, pp. 247–248) divided the most frequently appearing features of these children into three basic areas:

1. General features – big energy, vitality, activity, large spectrum of interests, rich vocabulary, early reading, ability to use abstract notions, outstanding memory and attentiveness, low tire-out inclination, interest in difficult themes, tendency to discuss.
2. Creative features – intellectual gamesomeness, rich fantasy, imagination, plenty creative ideas, flexibility and gamesomeness in thinking, originality, sense of esthetics, impulsivity, emotional sensitivity and vulnerability.
3. Learning features – fast learning progress, easy learning and joy of intellectual activities, acuteness in observation, ability to discern details as well as to see the essence of a problem, good analytical-synthetic as well as creative thinking.

The specific needs of gifted children involve primarily emotional and social areas. While the intellectual area of these children is highly developed, in the emotional area they show certain immaturity. Such disharmonic development can cause problems especially when they begin school attendance. J. Laznibatová (p. 265) says that up to 20% of these children suffer from emotional problems that diminish their performance and lead to personality disability to accommodate. This means that the adaptability for school environment worsens, so individual experiences and feelings in the teaching process do what negatively influences performance.

The social area is also a problem for gifted children. The quoted author (p. 267) points to the existence of a positive correlation between these children's intelligence and their social knowledge, however, it does not exist between their intelligence and their real behaviour. This means that these children know exactly how to behave, but in reality they are so much "their own" that they do not behave in the expected way. For them, what is characteristic is their competitiveness in social relations, they do not have friends at school, they tend to be close in social relationships, they need equal partners for work or play, and that is why they direct their attention to older children or adults.

The research by J. Laznibatova and V. Mačišáková (2000) has proved that gifted children appear as individualists in a group if they do not find any mentally equal partners for communication. In classes for gifted children dyadic relationships

often arise, and friendships of three or four children appear exceptionally. There is no classical leader; it is rather a group of distinctive personalities, individuals (especially in higher grades). However, they generally say that social relations and the level of social adaptation are not sharply worsened.

The said findings have led us to our wish to prove the existence of differences in social climate perception in the classes for gifted children and in regular school classes and we realized a research probe; its results are presented in the next part of this article.

### **Research goal. Methods. Research sample**

The goal of the realized research was to find out and compare the social climate in the classes for gifted children and in regular elementary school classes. We began with the limitation of climate according to J. Mareš and J. Lašek (1990–91 p. 173), who described it as “a long-term phenomenon that is socially conditioned and typical of a given class and a given teacher for a period of several months or years”. The level of social climate in class expresses the level of pupils’ adaptation to school conditions from the point of view of the demands of the learning process as well as of the requirements on behaviour toward teachers and schoolmates. On the other hand, the notion “social atmosphere”, which is also used, is characterized by the quoted authors as a short-term phenomenon, which is situationally conditioned and unstable.

At the same time, we use the limitation of the climate components in school class according to B.J. Fraser and D.L. Fisher, whose questionnaire (My Class Inventory) we used. The questionnaire helps evaluate social climate according to five variables:

1. Contentedness in class – it determines the level of contentedness, peace of mind, pupils’ relationship with their own class.
2. Arguments in class – it determines the level of tension, arguments in class, and complications in the relationships among pupils.
3. Competitiveness in class – it determines the attempts to excel, and the competitive relationships among pupils.
4. The demands of learning – it determines how pupils experience school demands, to what extent learning seems to be demanding.
5. Class cohesiveness – it determines both friendly and hostile relationships among pupils, their mutual solidarity.

The experiences with this questionnaire are shown by J. Mareš, J. Lašek (1991), H. Hrubíšková, P. Machalický (1994), M. Flešková (1997). Further we used socio-

metric questionnaire that involved 9 questions directed into 4 areas of preference attitudes: physical closeness, cooperation, intimacy, and entertainment. In order to compare the results of My Class Inventory questionnaire we employed Student's t-test and we processed the results of the sociometric questionnaire into two sociometric indexes. The index of group cohesiveness (of serriedness) is a ratio of the summation of mutual choices as compared with the maximal possible number of choices of this type. The index of social coherence (of serriedness) is given by the ratio of the summation of mutual choices as compared with the summary of positive choices.

### Hypotheses:

1. We assumed a higher level of demands, more complications in relations and a higher level of competitiveness in the classes for gifted children than in the regular ones.
2. We assumed a higher level of solidarity and contentedness in regular classes than in the classes for gifted children.

The research sample was made up by 3rd, 4th and 5th graders of the elementary school in Rimavská Sobota, where there have been classes for gifted children together with regular classes since 1997. The research sample was made up altogether by 109 pupils, out of those 36 pupils were in the classes for gifted children and 73 pupils in regular classes.

### The results:

The results of My Class Inventory questionnaire expressed by average values of points and the comparison of the statistical importance of differences between the classes for gifted children and regular classes are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Average result values the My Class Inventory test – statistical importance of differences**

Variables	gifted (N=36)		regular (N=73)		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Contentedness	12.94	2.22	13.89	1.51	2.617*
Arguments	10.64	3.08	8.53	3.06	3.372**
Competitiveness	13.17	2.31	11.23	3.01	3.388**
Demands	7.75	2.60	6.26	1.77	3.517**
Solidarity	9.11	2.91	9.55	3.12	0.703

Legend: gifted = classes for gifted children; regular = regular classes; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results that were obtained through the comparison of answers of the pupils from the classes for gifted children and regular classes in My Class Inventory questionnaire showed highly important differences between these classes in the variables of arguments, competitiveness, and contentedness.

In the classes for gifted children the level of contentedness was lower, the level of tensions and complications in relationships as well as the level of competitiveness was higher than in the regular classes. The demand to learn was also felt by the gifted pupils more intensively than in the regular classes. The level of solidarity proved to be almost equal in both examined groups.

In order to complete the information on social relationships in the examined classes we calculated, on the basis of the data obtained from the sociometric questionnaire, the index of group cohesiveness and the index of group coherence that showed the serriedness and solidarity of the class. The values of indexes for particular school classes are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: The values of the indexes for particular school classes**

Classes	gifted			regular		
	3 <sup>rd</sup> gr.	4 <sup>th</sup> gr.	5 <sup>th</sup> gr.	3 <sup>rd</sup> gr.	4 <sup>th</sup> gr.	5 <sup>th</sup> gr.
Group cohesiveness	1.87	0.45	0.86	0.35	0.21	0.38
Group coherence	0.33	0.22	0.28	0.27	0.15	0.19

Legend: gifted = classes for gifted children regular = regular classes

Higher values in both calculated indexes were reached by the pupils of the classes for gifted children, which means that the classes for gifted children are more compact and undivided.

When comparing particular classes, we found out in the classes for gifted children, similarly as J. Laznibatová and V. Mačišáková (2000) did, that the younger gifted children were (3rd grade), the more distinct attitudes of friendship they kept with their classmates, which was proved by more frequently repeated social bonds with their classmates (Table 2 – indexes of group cohesiveness and coherence), their school class was more compact with a smaller number of conflicts, and pupils were more contented (Table 3). In the regular classes it is vice versa. The fifth grade is more compact and there is a smaller number of conflicts among pupils.

**Table 3: Average values of the results in My Class Inventory test for individual school classes**

Variables		Contentedness	Quarrels	Competitiveness	Demands	Solidarity	
G	3.E N=10	M	13.60	7.80	11.80	6.00	11.80
		SD	2.11	2.35	3.29	1.05	2.15
	4.E N=18	M	12.71	11.21	13.86	8.79	7.43
		SD	1.73	2.72	1.29	2.49	1.95
	5.D N=12	M	12.67	12.33	13.50	8.00	8.83
		SD	2.81	2.46	1.93	3.02	2.89
R	3.D N=18	M	14.44	8.67	12.33	6.11	7.83
		SD	1.33	2.09	1.81	1.23	2.28
	4.A N=28	M	13.57	10.07	11.61	6.32	9.68
		SD	1.73	3.18	2.90	2.11	3.36
	5.A N=27	M	13.85	6.85	9.74	6.30	10.56
		SD	1.32	2.64	3.34	1.75	2.95

Legend: G = classes for gifted children R = regular classes

## Discussion

The shown results prove the up to now known information on gifted children to a certain extent; according to those gifted children are distinctively individualistic, nonconformist, struggling for perfect performance, setting high goals for themselves while trying to fulfill them independently. This may explain the higher score of conflict and competitiveness found in the classes for gifted children. We accept hypothesis 1.

In connection with the characteristics of gifted children we assumed that the rate of compactness would be higher than that in regular classes. Even though the rate of compactness in My Class Inventory questionnaire was a little higher than in the regular classes (BT – AM = 9.55, NT – AM = 9.11), according to the sociometric questionnaire, based on calculated indexes of group cohesiveness and group coherence, the classes for gifted children are more compact. In this part we do not accept hypothesis 2. The said contradiction in terms we link to the research techniques employed. While My Class Inventory questionnaire examines school class social climate as a long-term, more stable phenomenon, the answers to the sociometric questions may mirror actual situational variables that create school class atmosphere changing also over the day or even over a teaching lesson. This fact can be explained by a smaller number of children in these classes (average number

of children is 12), and resulting out of it possibilities of more frequent mutual contact, through an unconventional shape of the class (benches arranged into U, which gives better eye contact with classmates), but also by the use of multifarious forms (group activity) and methods of teaching employed in these classes by the teacher.

Within variable “contentedness” we accept hypothesis 2, we have found out that the pupils from the regular classes are happier with the relationships and atmosphere in class (the difference is statistically important) than the pupils from the classes for gifted children. The social atmosphere in the regular classes is obviously more favourable, which is also proved by further data of the examined variables (arguments, competitiveness) as well as the demands on learning from the part of the school, that are more felt by the gifted children.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings prove that gifted children are a specific group not only as to their intellectual but also social characteristics. Gifted children encounter more complications in relationships but their classes are more compact. These children, however, are less happy and they feel higher demands on learning than pupils from regular classes. Based on the present knowledge on social relations in classes for gifted children as well as on our findings, it results that teachers in these classes must develop not only gifted children’s intellectual potential but also interpersonal relationships in class, positive social climate, and appropriate tolerance among classmates, and empathy, i.e., to develop their social and emotional intelligence. The results of our research probe also show the need to regularly and repeatedly check the level of social relations in classes for gifted children.

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