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Studying Teachers' and Parents' attitudes Towards Educationally Underperforming Adolescents – Students of General Education Schools

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Abstract

The present article describes a study of teachers' and parents' attitudes towards educationally underperforming students of general education school from the humanistic pedagogy and personality-oriented perspectives. The present study is an attempt to substantially define the meaning and the role of teachers' and parents' attitudes towards educationally underperforming adolescents who study in general education schools, in order to define the real position of the underperforming school student and the opportunities for improving this situation, which remains default for that student. Addressing teachers' and parents' attitudes towards educationally underperforming adolescents is valid and significant because it is obviously needed in pedagogical practice.

Keywords: educational underperformance, the teacher's attitude towards students, parents' attitude, style of controlling students and children's behavior

Introduction

A significant aspect in constructing an individual approach to working with students is the teacher's attitude towards educationally underperforming students. R. Rosenthal and L. Jacobson's 1968 study (Burns, 1986: 282–285) addressed the issue of teachers' biased approach in assessing a student's potential abilities in edu-

cation and the consequences of such bias. This study revealed that a teacher's bias in assessing a student's general intellectual abilities affected the work which the teacher conducted. On the one hand, the fact of a direct correlation is doubtless, because a teacher's idea about a student's educational abilities is based upon the educational achievements of the latter (Eikenbusch, 2011: 6; Nevskiy, 1982), and on the other hand, this idea predefines the corresponding attitude which stimulates the student's prospective achievements (good, intermediate or unsatisfactory).

Furthermore, the reason which the teacher uses to explain the student's success or failure (whether it is their abilities, commitment, their limitations or insufficiency), defines the corresponding attitude, which would either facilitate or prevent the student's successful educational activity. In other words, if the teacher explains the reason for failure by the student's lack of commitment and effort, it leads to the increase in the student's educational performance; on the contrary, in the case when the teacher considers the student to be incapable and intellectually limited, he has the corresponding attitude and conducts his pedagogical work according to this attitude, which does not facilitate the student's educational achievements. It can be concluded that a consolidated attitude towards the student defines the choice of educational methods used by the teacher in the process of individual work with the student in and out of class. In line with these thoughts it is especially important to note **the meaning and the role of teachers' and parents' attitudes towards educationally underperforming adolescents who study in general education school.**

Main part of the study

We conducted some observation of the activity of teachers in various schools. It revealed that the teacher's attitude towards educationally underperforming adolescents is usually characterized by emotional withdrawal, alienation, implicit or explicit dissatisfaction, annoyance, disrespect and a firm authoritative style of communication. Such an attitude usually creates the teacher's predisposition and predefines the strategy and tactics of pedagogical intervention, the choice of educational methods and means of stimulation. In the majority of cases they may be characterized as negative and the attitude – as unprofessional, unqualified, incompetent, which reveals the teacher's lack of knowledge and inability to account for the individual differences of educationally underperforming students.

This obviously happens because the educational underperformance, which is a result of educational flaws and mistakes, defines the student's educational draw-

backs, their behavioral deviations, the defects of their relationships with classmates and teachers and disproportional individual development. It also increases some of the student's individual psychological characteristics which are perceived and rated as negative by the teacher. Weak attention, bad memory, insufficient mental agility, undeveloped abilities to memorize the study material and to perform various tasks and slow performance speed are considered as inattentiveness, distractibility, inability to sit still and to behave and a negative attitude towards the study process. During the observation of the educationally underperforming student's personality, these characteristics prevail and define the attitude in general. In some cases, knowing the reasons for the student's drawbacks and underperformance, the teacher cannot choose the right methods due to the insufficient knowledge about the methods of individual approach and the limited successful experience in its implementation. In some cases the teacher's attitude towards educationally underperforming student is firmly negative and may even reach the level of a lack of emotional and personal acceptance of the student. In this case the teacher does not wish to know anything else. In rare situations the teacher might initially be an unkind person.

Observations demonstrate that teachers' common attitude is self-withdrawal from the extremely hard work of teaching underperforming students, from the work which requires a higher level of pedagogical proficiency. The teacher's activity becomes formal, their educational methods become punishment methods, and stimulating methods become negative and generally penitentiary. In the majority of cases (Weindel-Güdemann, 2011: 29) they contain disapproving statements, inactive moralizing, disciplinary means, threats, use of punishment, public discussion on the teachers and parents board meetings, demonstration of flaws and failures to the classmates, ignorance of the minor education progress, annoyed reaction to the mistakes and demonstration of one's own disappointment. Teachers might also devote less time to answering their questions in class in comparison with other students, make impolite comments and react impatiently to their inaccurate answers. They might not hold back their disapproval and negativity, they might rarely address the underperforming students in class, use the grades that state the current situation instead of the stimulating ones and grading upon the normative or predefined criterion while excluding the personal one.

An inevitable consequence of such a situation is insufficient and conflict relationships between educationally underperforming students and teachers and growing withdrawal. It results in emotional and contextual barriers, the relationships often become hostile, affect the relationships of these students with their classmates and result in impairing communication with them. Finally, edu-

cationally underperforming students “fall out” of the educational process system and school ceases to be an environment where an adolescent can satisfy the most significant needs of his age – the needs for self-respect, trusting communication, emotional support and group affiliation. As a result, these adolescents fall under the influence of other environments, which are usually asocial, and consolidate in informal groups.

We aimed to reveal the teacher's substantial attitude to the student in order to define the real position of the educationally underperforming student and the opportunities for improving the situation, which seems to be default for this student.

Methods

In order to reveal the characteristics of the teacher's attitude towards students and of parents' attitudes towards their children, we used a test-questionnaire of parental attitude (QPA) by A.Ya. Varg and V.V. Stolin (Stolin, 1985: 107–113). We used an adapted version of the questionnaire to study the teacher's attitude towards students.

The respondents for the questionnaire were 156 teachers of four general education schools – school #32 of Petropavlovsk, schools #13 and #100 of Kokshetau and school #196 of Moscow – and 186 parents from the same schools.

During the assessment of the parents' attitudes we referred to the authors' questionnaire definition, which states that parental attitude is “a system of various feelings towards a child, of behavioral stereotypes, realized in communication with him, perception features and understanding of the child's personality and character and his actions” (Eikenbusch, 2011: 107).

The questionnaire structure includes five scales: 1. “Acceptance – denial”; 2. “Cooperation”; 3. “Symbiosis”; 4. “Authoritative hyper-personalization”; and 5. “Little loser”.

A high test score on the appropriate scale, obtained upon the results calculation, is interpreted as: “denial” on the first scale, “social undesirability” on the second scale, “symbiosis” on the third scale, “hyper-personalization” on the fourth scale and “infantilization” (invalidization) on the fifth scale.

The questionnaire procedure consisted of the following steps. The subjects were provided with the questionnaire text with a list of statements and an answer sheet for them. Before the beginning of the test the subjects received instructions concerning filling in the test-questionnaire. The subjects had to rank the statements

as “true” or “false” regarding themselves and to simultaneously cross the square “T” (true) or “F” (false), corresponding to the question number on the answer sheet. The results were analyzed with the special “key” that provided the opportunity for calculating the number of answers which were the same as the standard scale. The “raw” scores obtained this way were transferred in the test normative scores according to the table, according to the scales. Finally, we compared the mean scores for each scale between different subject groups.

Statistical significance of the differences was assessed by Student’s t-test.

The obtained results have the following substantial interpretation (according to the description provided by the QPA authors).

The first scale shows the integral emotional attitude towards the child. Most frequently, the parents experience anger, annoyance, regret and bitterness; they do not trust the child and do not respect him. Generally, it seems to the parents that the child would not succeed in life, because he is not capable, smart or gifted enough and, moreover, he has bad tendencies. As a result, the child is viewed and assessed as bad, weak, unadjusted and unlucky. (This interpretation corresponds to high scores on the scale).

The second scale reflects the socially desirable image of parental attitude. The parent understands the feelings, aspirations and goals of his child, he is involved in the child’s activities and plans and he sympathizes with the child. Moreover, this sympathy turns into a real emotional identification. The parent highly ranks the child’s potential opportunities, regarding both intellectual abilities and skills. He demonstrates the child’s achievements and successes to others, develops the child’s self-worth. The parent trusts the child and respects him. In conflict situations the parent tries to understand the child and values his opinion. He supports the child’s new activities, encourages his independence and aims to reach equal communication.

The third scale. Its scores indicate interpersonal distance in the communication with the child. High scores on this scale reflect parents’ urge to create symbiotic relationships with their child. This can be characterized in the following way. The parent is overly anxious about the child’s health and life, he is constantly anxious about the child, wants to neutralize the influence of any dangerous, in his opinion, situations and to separate the child from trouble and misfortunes. The parent takes away the child’s opportunity to independently overcome difficulties. The parent sees the child as a weak creature that needs his constant protection. The child’s growth does not stimulate the parent’s urge to provide the child with independence; on the contrary, the child’s efforts to separate increase the parent’s anxiety, which is already high.

The fourth scale. The results of the scores on this scale can help to define the type and direction of control over the child's behavior. A high score reveals authoritativeness in the parental attitude. Parental authority is based on the full and unquestioned conformity and obedience of the child. The child receives strict requirements to fully obey in any situation, which are justified by the necessity to get used to discipline. Most frequently, educational actions are reduced to punishment or threats of punishment; everything reflects the parent's will. The child is faced with a high level of expectations of achievements and with requirements of reaching social success. Moreover, the parents know their child really well, along with his individual characteristics, habits, thoughts and feelings.

The fifth scale. The scores on this scale allow for assessing the characteristics of parents' perception and understanding of their child. High scores on this scale vividly demonstrate such characteristics of the parent's attitude as a tendency to infantilize the child, to attribute personal and social incompetence to him and to diminish his abilities in comparison with the real age normative. The parents do not expect such achievements from their child as he should actually be able to obtain at his age. They do not contain their annoyance and disappointment related to the child's failures, do not trust him and tend to strictly control his actions.

Results and discussion

According to the brief characteristics of the questionnaire scales interpretation, we can describe the data which we obtained during the administration of the questionnaire. Table 1 presents the final results of QPA.

Table 1. Significance of the differences in mean test scores of the questionnaire results for teachers and parents who assess their attitude towards the children

Scales	School #	Mean test scores		Significance of the differences (Student's t-test)
		teachers	parents	
1 st scale	100	78.1	63.2	<i>P</i> <0.01
	13	62.1	59.5	insignificant
	32	67.7	59.7	<i>P</i> <0.05
	196	81.5	81.9	insignificant
2 nd scale	100	48.2	50.8	<i>P</i> <0.05
	13	59.4	57.8	insignificant
	32	57.0	57.5	insignificant

Scales	School #	Mean test scores	Significance of the differences (Student's t-test)	
3 rd scale	196	53.6	56.9	$P < 0.05$
	100	60.2	62.8	$P < 0.05$
	13	62.6	65.3	$P < 0.05$
	32	61.2	63.4	insignificant
	196	53.3	60.1	$P < 0.05$
4 th scale	100	58.9	76.3	$P < 0.01$
	13	64.8	72.9	$P < 0.05$
	32	72.5	57.3	$P < 0.05$
	196	57.6	67.1	$P < 0.05$
5 th scale	100	76.8	77.1	$P < 0.05$
	13	71.1	75.6	$P < 0.05$
	32	67.5	66.3	$P < 0.05$
	196	83.2	82.2	insignificant

Firstly, it is worth noticing that the high test scores were obtained on all the questionnaire scales, both for the teachers' and the parents' responses.

The comparison of mean scores, obtained by QPA (questionnaire of parental attitudes), shows a significant increase in the score on the 1st scale for the teachers in comparison with the parents. These differences are statistically significant, except for the data of Moscow school #196.

The 2nd scale revealed increased scores for the parents from three schools, except school #13. It is necessary to note that the differences are statistically significant only for schools #100 and #196. Despite that fact, the increased score on the 2nd scale for three schools is obvious for the parents. On the 3rd scale for the parents the increase cannot be seen for all the scales, although the differences between the teachers and the parents of schools #100, #13 and #196 are significant. Increased score on the 3rd scale for the parents of school #32 is insignificant.

Mean scores on the 4th scale for the parents revealed a significant prevalence of the teachers' scores in schools #100, #13 and #196. For school #32 we found the opposite prevalence. The differences are statistically significant for all the schools.

The results on the 5th scale were heterogeneous for all schools. The mean scores of the teachers in schools #196 and #100 were prevailing, whereas in schools #13 and #32 the parents' scores showed an increase. Statistically significant differences were revealed only for school #196, although there is an increase in the teachers' scores.

Analyzing the questionnaire results, we did not set the goal of finding and defining the differences in the teachers' and parents' attitudes towards the children between the schools, but we aimed at revealing and stating certain tendencies in the teachers' attitudes towards students and the parents' attitudes towards their children and at showing the differences, if there were any.

Based on the questionnaire structure, we defined two opposite styles of the child's/student's behavior control – authoritative (democratic), according to the low scores of the 1st scale and scores of the 2nd scale, and authoritarian, according to the scores of the 4th scale and high scores on the 1st scale.

In the context of the style of the child's/student's behavior control it is important to note that high scores on the 1st scale correspond to the negative end in the emotional attitude both in the parents and teachers. However, this emotional attitude, which can be characterized as negative, is mostly revealed in the medium scores of the teachers, which statistically significantly exceed the scores of the parents. The scores on the 1st scale in school #196 are different in this context. These differences demonstrate only the qualitative aspect; the scale scores reach equally high levels for the teachers and students. In other words, the questionnaire results allow for revealing the teacher's more negative, almost close to the negative end, integral attitude towards the student, in comparison with the parent's attitude towards their child, who is a student of middle school.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study described above, it is possible to conclude that in the majority of cases educationally underperforming students have an unfavorable position in the relationship system with their classmates, teachers, class mentors and parents. Moreover, the student's situation seems to be default for him. These children cannot choose another parents, change school or class mentor. Emotional denial, authoritative style of behavior control and invalidization by parents and teachers towards the educationally underperforming adolescents, as well as their low status among classmates and educational failures increase the educational underperformance and divergence from the classmates; they stimulate the adolescent to find inadequate ways to improve his status and define behavioral deviations and development of school maladaptation.

Based on the above, we can state that the individual approach to educationally underperforming adolescents should be a respectful and kind attitude towards them, positive perception of their personality as a whole, emotional and personal

acceptance, which would allow for correcting the deviations in their educational activity, behavior and relationships with significant adults – teachers, parents, class mentors – and in their interpersonal relationships with the classmates.

The novelty of the study results

As a result of the study of the teachers' and parents' attitudes towards educationally underperforming adolescents, students of general education school, the specificity of influential adults' attitudes towards educationally underperforming adolescents has been identified:

A) The authoritarian style of teachers' and parents' control of the educationally underperforming adolescents behavior is expressed in a different way, compared to the socially desirable style – an authoritative-democratic one.

B) Teachers and parents' rejection of the individuality of educationally underperforming adolescents manifests itself as emotional detachment, disengagement, hidden or obvious irritation, or emotional rejection. In this case, teachers' attitude to educationally underperforming adolescents is more negative, getting negatively expressed, as compared to parents' attitude to the child.

C) Teachers and parents' negative perception of individual psychological characteristics of educationally underperforming adolescents influences the assessment of the personality of educationally underperforming adolescents in general.

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