

CHARACTER STRENGTHS AS ONE OF THE DETERMINANTS OF CLASSROOM CLIMATE'S QUALITY

© Barbora LÍŠKOVÁ
(University of Trnava, Trnava, Slovakia)

b.liskova@gmail.com

The article briefly presents a new scientific discipline-positive psychology and selects one topic - character strengths. It also describes each of these strengths and defines a research instrument (questionnaire Via Youth) which can be used to measure these strengths. It also defines the classroom climate and presents various methods for its examination. Content of the second part of the article is an outline of research methodology aimed to identify character strengths and its relations to classroom climate's quality.

Keywords: positive psychology, character strengths, classroom climate

The positive psychology is a movement that was founded in the United States of America at the end of 20th century. In the beginning, this psychological study provoked a strong wave of criticism by its radical ideas and opinions; however, nowadays after more than one decade of its existence some radical thoughts have proven their importance and enriched present psychological studies by several major topics. The creation of various research tools designated for finding positive humane values and strong character natures had high influence in positive psychology research. The positive psychology cannot be in isolated existence, therefore it is trying to apply findings in other scientific disciplines, and by this act a new trend of applied positive psychology is being created. Various results are being used mainly in consulting services and psychotherapy, coaching, and in behavioral-educational processes.

The knowledge of subjects' character strengths in the behavioral-educational processes constitutes the inevitable condition for high-quality and successful education. It is important to realize that every schoolchildren's character and behavior is being formed by encounters with people's strong character features. In the same way these strong character features influences the whole area where education takes place, especially in a school classroom.

According to our ideas detection of a relationship between character strengths together with classroom climate is significant in the research. If we are capable to diagnose strengths by easy and effective way, we might have a good chance to apply individual approach to every scholar which will respect and also improve its own features. Global results of character strengths represented among high school students allow deduce various educational and behavioral strategies in order to enforce currently owned strengths and also build up insufficient strength features. Acquired results

from the research can be applied in other signs of education reality investigation.

The Positive Psychology and Character Strengths

The concept of positive psychology was firstly presented at the American Psychology Association Conference in the year 1998, with Chairman Martin E. Seligman at that time. Seligman (Seligman & Csíkszentmihályi, 2000) pointed out that from the Second World War the psychology focused primarily on the pathology, which basically has its justification, however the psychology commitment is still unfulfilled because it does not reply on important question- how to make human life better. The representatives of positive psychology C. S. Snyder and S. J. Lopez (2002) proposed the separation from present psychology, and declared independence at the pathological model together with planned separated and different science.

The first conference on the positive psychology issue had taken place in the Lincoln, Nebraska in the year 1999. At the same year the Manifest of the positive psychology was published, and after that revised in 2000 together with the American Psychologist publication and Journal of Happiness Studies. In the year 2004 the manual of positively-psychological analogy was published the DSM Character Strengths and virtues: A handbook and Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). From the year 2006 new special scientific magazines come out called The Journal of Positive Psychology. From that time the positive psychology has significantly integrated into other psychological sections (Peterson, 2006).

According to M. E. Seligman and M. Csíkszentmihályi (2000) the main goal is building up the best qualities of lifetime. Besides, currently the core of interest is the research and support of the positive potential and human personality tendency together with issues of human character strengths and human moral character. Very important point is also the nowadays trend of positive psychology in case of application of knowledge in practice. A lot of emphasis is put to make use of results in the area of lifestyle, in educational process, psychotherapy and counseling, psychology of managing, and in public administration (Slezáčková, 2010).

In recent years, the positive psychology is mainly oriented in identification of character features as a pillar of its focus and as a center of understanding of positively good lifetime. It applies the newest approach in ideas of character, intelligence, creativity, and so on. For character, it is important to access it systematically in multidimensional terminology. At the beginning of the research the main problem was the answers of the questions, related to character (it is possible to define character in active sense, it is composed of several aspects, existence of character grades, character can be learned, it improves, and so on.). The scientist team guided by M. Seligman tried to find an answer on that, and they proposed qualified system to measure human strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The group around M. Seligman studied ethical, philosophical, and religious texts. From studies of Aristotle, Plato, Aquinas, Augustine, The Old Testament, Talmud, Confucius, Buddha, Koran, and so on; the researchers' team acquired around 200 virtues from which they selected those virtues that are omnipresent and no overlapping. Scientist team discovered six basic and universal human virtues: *wisdom, courage, humanity, mercy, gentleness, and transcendence*. Those virtues are basic properties of person with good character and also are supported by almost all churches and philosophical movement. However, it is important to realize that those general virtues are hard to measure and

observe their expressions. So, the team decided to create taxonomy of character strengths based on these six virtues, in order to qualify virtues and by the means of taxonomy to measure and even later expand and reinforce the character strengths. The character strengths are viewed as unique features of human nature, as a permanent characteristic, from dispositions to individual attributes of personality. Moreover, another view emphasize that character strengths can be primarily enhanced from the abilities of using various resources, disposable abilities, and also abilities inevitable in problem solving, to reach needed goal, for auto regulation, and so on.

The authors of this taxonomy warn that current statement does not have to be final version. They also claim that it will be very difficult to create classification, which will be valid in every culture and time. According to this argument, they created a variant that can be applied to American and European middle class. Therefore they assume, in the next time period the taxonomy will be modified, due to empirical research and new theoretical approach.

School and Classroom Environment

In context of the positive psychology, the school environment can be classified into so called positive institutions issues. Even though, that the positive psychology is dedicated to positive institutions; according to Ch. Peterson (2006) it is vital to treat this term very cautiously. He claims that we cannot say about any institution that it is pure good or bad. In every institution is mixed good and bad features. Forasmuch as the positive psychology dedicates itself into ideal and set tracks, by which it is able to reach this ideal, it created *file of virtues* that have positive institutions. That file is inspired by taxonomy of human virtues, founded in order to determine strengths of character (Peterson, 2006):

- Intention, purpose: common vision of moral goals of organization those are constantly reached and enforced.
- Security: the protection against threats, dangers, and abuse.
- Objectiveness: appropriate rules of using punishments and rewards.
- Humanity: concern, attention, and interest.
- Dignity: treatment of all people in organization as independent full-valued individuals, regardless of their social status.

Among the all institutions basically school gained its own specific place. School is sometimes called as a life institution because education practices have long term influence on a scholar and significantly affect its future life. This penetrating influence is integrated part of an explicit sense of the school. Obviously, the school's intention is to give knowledge and encourage intellectual qualities of a scholar. Most nowadays schools are pointing at the scholar grades rating instead of a subject's achievement in scholar education. The school grades rating cannot be interchanged with moral goals of education. At the same time, schools can play significant task in the reduction of violence, chicanery, and other inappropriate behavior; however, eliminating of these problems is not the main goal of schools. In this case, the school can be compared with police department.

The positive schools should support their students in various activities during the teaching process. Positive attitudes and motivation are transferred into good academic results, but more important is that schools support students in whole-life education. Students can identify with school goals and achievements only if the school sets up clear and understandable goals.

Various achievements are boosting students' motivation to learning, and also their activity in teaching process. The positive school is emphasizing the individuality of scholar and rewarding his/her effort in the improvement. These schools are creating an environment in which students feel safe and they are being educated in responsible behavior, conscientious, eventually to become productive parts of the society.

According to Ch. Peterson (2006) the positive schools can be characterized by following:

- Scholars can perceive schooling as important,
- Scholars have feeling that they can control situation on what is going on in the classroom,
- Students sense that rules of school discipline are valid, constant, just, clear, comprehensible, and systematically abided in regards with correction and building up students' abilities,
- Scholars can see rewards as the rational system, basically because the school can recognize their success and after that they are being rewarded for that,
- Strong and effective parliament exists in the school,
- Headmaster disposing with strong managing abilities,
- Pedagogues are trying to eliminate school impersonality, and they are creating a contact among teachers and students from which good co-operation and fellowship with students is created.

Besides the school climate can express particular attitudes of individual actors of educational process in classroom. It is very important to realize that student spend its time in classroom with its classmates most of the time therefore he is shaped by the other personalities and his character is being influenced by that. Basically, with whom the student in contact within classroom has strong influence on his future life.

Proposed research problem and methodology of solution

In our planned research, we try to focus on detection of relationship of strengths and classroom climate. It is important to realize that climate is variable and get clearer significance in relation with "something" (Furman, 1998). If we are talking about environment, precisely joining climate into something, usually called the environment. The concept of climate gains importance, though more specific, what is certain in psychological environment support.

As we already mentioned, the main goal of research will be detection of how character strengths influence classroom climate, and which strengths specifically creating or reducing the positive classroom climate. Knowledge of scholar's strengths of character has huge importance for his educational reality. Nowadays age requires higher intellectual abilities, self-reliance creativity, higher motivation, individual commitment, activity and self-responsibility. If we would like to educate this harmonic personality, we must be familiar with specific background of every student. In previous researches of the scholar personalities, researchers could not agree whether it is better to describe series of student characteristics which sought to quantify it, or to include student into typological groups. The main disadvantage of the second method is that these typologies emerge from the global understanding of personality and cannot allow sufficient differentiation of students. The dynamic theory of personalities was developed by Lewin and

later by Murphy (Ďurič & Štefanovič, 1977). This model however did not bring satisfying results.

Various methods are used to observe student's character and personality in Slovakia. According to L. Višňovský (2000) characterization of spheres, it is important to focus on scholar following character: 1. Motivation, interests, and dispositions, thus what scholar wants and follow, what is his life goals. 2. Abilities and talents (intellectual, creative, special talent). 3. Character, it means how is student in present, his attitudes and ideas on various issues of social life, his world-view orientation. 4. Temperament, typology of student's nature information.

The consistent model of detecting character strengths of student has not yet been founded. Observation, dialogues, amnesias, and so on are mostly employed. These methods are quite often affected by teacher's subjective opinion, therefore it is appropriate to bring diagnostic method, which will be able to explore students' strengths in objective way, into Slovak schools. One of the options could be the questionnaire of Via-Youth that enable to measure these strengths. The Via-Youth survey precede the questionnaire called VIA-IS (Seligman & Peterson, 2004) designated to adult population. Before its final version this questionnaire undergo several changes and was filled by 150.000 people from USA, Canada, Australia, Europe, South Africa, Asia, and Africa. In detection of classroom climate will be used the KLIT questionnaire founded by J. Lašek (2004), which was aimed mainly on supportive classroom climate diagnose, and also to individual unique abilities of scholars specifically to motivation to negative school performance and self-realization.

Conclusion

Overall, the main goal of the research was to detect what is the relation among the character strengths to classroom climate, and also what strengths specifically have higher influence on the climate. Personalities with intense character strengths are popular and have better interpersonal relationships. This is very important for education. Good social climate has significant effect on whole schooling, also to student motivation to education, to final wisdom of students, and for their personal life. The acquired results may be used to improve existing prevention and intervention programs for positive development of youth. Information can lead to creation of effective development program, focused on character features that are not sufficiently developed in both adolescents and children. For teachers it is preferable to start with already developed character features, ensuring of student motivation, and then seamlessly exchange to other strengths of character. It is important to realize that it is necessary to have open and experienced pedagogical approach.

Our research could become as an inspiration for all instructors that work with children and youth. We assume that the acquired results will lead to improvement of social relations not only among children in classroom, but also outside the school in contact with peers, adults, and older people.

References

- ĎURIČ, L., ŠTEFANOVIČ, J., et al. (1977). *Psychológia pre učiteľov*. Bratislava: SPN.
- FURMAN, A. (1998). Klíma v škole a školskej triede. *Školský psychológ*, 8 (3-4), Retrieved from http://www.lfhk.cuni.cz/mares/sp/casopis/98/clanky/furman_sb.htm [12.10.2011].
- LAŠEK, J. (2004). Nová metodazjišťováníklimatutřídy. In Lašek, J. (Ed), *Aktuální otázky psychologieučitele* (pp. 69-75). Hradec Králové: Gaudeamus.
- PETERSON, Ch. (2006). *A Primer in PositivePsychology*. New York: OxfordUniversity Press.
- PETERSON, Ch., & SELIGMAN, M. (2004). *CharacterStrengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. Oxford: American Psychological Association.
- SELIGMAN, M., & CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, M. (2009). Positive Psychology: An Introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 5-14.
- SLEZÁČKOVÁ, A. (2010). Pozitivnípsychologie – vědanejen o štěstí. *Psychologie*, 4 (3), 55-70.
- SNYDER, C. R., & LOPEZ, S. J. (2002). *Handbook of positive psychology*. New York: OxfordUniversity Press.
- VIŠŇOVSKÝ, L. (2000). *Základy školskej pedagogiky*. Bratislava: Iris.