EMPATHY – A PROFESSIONAL VALUE OF STRESS RESISTANT TEACHERS

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the issue of training teachers to resist occupational stress by showing empathic behavior. Regarded as a professional value, empathy is based on the ability to intuit people's feelings. It is a quality everyone should possess in order to interact with others, be they colleagues, subordinates, customers etc.*

Key words: *empathy, empathic behavior, occupational stress, stress resistance.*

1. Introduction

In the time of socio-economic reforms, when people are frustrated by the effects of changes, the problem of stress resistance is often the essence of many public debates, its development being regarded as essential for social performance, including professional performance. Moreover, the factors triggering stress differ from person to person and the consequences vary depending on the individual characteristics of each of us, and on the capacity to manage one's own feelings.

In teaching, the effects of stress can motivate and boost progress and career promotion (positive perception of stress – eustress), but it can also discourage activity (negative perception of stress – distress). The perception of stress at work depends on the quality of initial and continuing professional training, on teacher's beliefs, on one's own values and opinions, on the relationships with others, etc. Each teacher reacts emotionally depending on the intensity of events, facts or contexts of life, but also depending on the level of adaptation and resistance to stress, the adaptive reactions being, mostly, educated and developed.

Currently, teachers accept the reforms within the system of education reluctantly since the changes they cause lead to professional stress. It appears that educational systems oppose resistance to change. Huberman (1978) identifies the following factors of professional resistance:

(a) *exogenous factors of resistance:* resistance to change, incompetence of external agents, lack of confidence, the subject being exposed to criticism by the whole society; insufficient connection between theory and practice; lack of opportunities to implement innovations, conservatism;

(b) *internal factors of resistance:* confusing and contradictory objectives, lack of rewards, lack of economic motivation and serious competition, unsatisfactory investment

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allotted   for development and for the refresher courses for teachers, especially at the beginning of teaching career, lack of effective criteria for assessing the educational activity that demotivates teachers to update teaching methods, insufficient modern educational models and attempts to implement the existing models in practice (it is diificult to persuade teachers that it is necessary to use this or that model of education, since they are more likely to accept a traditional variant);

(c) *restrictive factors* (implementation of beneficial innovations occurs very slowly).

The need to develop resistance to occupational stress is determined typically by insufficient satisfaction of fundamental needs. Therefore, the intensity of the phenomenon in question may be reduced or prevented by careful examination of the fundamental psychological needs: (a) *the need for autonomy*, which refers to the choices people can make and how much time is allocated because the degree of motivational adhesion to the given activity depends on it; *(b) the need for competence* means that self-determination will occur at the extent to which the individual feels he/she is effective; (c) the need for relatedness refers to the need for emotional support, participation and sincere understanding by significant people. Meeting this need is particularly important for integrating external motivations in the structure of the self, and for direct learning of behavioral patterns. In the authors' vision, these three needs are innate, essential to self-determination and universal – representatives of different cultures have the same basic needs (Reeve, 2010).

Among the qualities of a teacher from the West, which contribute to the successful realization of professional functions, we could point out tolerance, resistance to stress, empathy, democratic communication, compassion, pedagogic tact, responsibility to the students and to all humanity. Being concerned in particular with the analysis of teachers' personality, Freeman (1993, p. 420-428) suggests that effective teachers should be friendly, cheerful, compassionate and morally virtuous rather than cruel, depressed, impatient. By "good" ethic behavior the author means sociability, optimal personal relationships, effective teachers being those who successfully avoid stressful situations. From our point of view, this is insufficient because professional life is stressful and, in these circumstances, the teacher must learn to monitor occupational stress to optimally use eustress. In this context, the author notes that the teachers' behavior includes three relevant "signs": the voice, the attitude of body and the gestures. The following qualities are added: tendency for self-improvement, liking for the pupils, respect for pupils' personality, composure, patience, attention, etc. The author is convinced that the teacher is the person who forms the man of the future, being a master of education and a master of professional training throughout his/her pedagogical activity. Or, teaching, just like any profession, is the result of accumulating psychopedagogical culture.

Summarizing, we conclude that empathic behaviour is one of the values of the teacher resistant to stress, along with all the qualities a modern teacher should possess: emotional balance, emotional maturity, emotional flexibility, emotional discipline, emotional creativity, relevance, assertiveness, availability, affective reasoning, tolerance, responsibility, emotional strength, constructive orientation, aspiration, objectivism, interest, emotional self-regulation, motivation, dedication, perseverance, adaptation, optimism, etc. (Reeve, 2010).

The role of empathy is particularly valuable not only at the economic and political level, but also at the interpersonal level. Today empathy is considered the quality which

each person should possess in order to interact efficiently with those around him/her, whether he/she talks to colleagues, subordinates, customers, etc.

The empathic behaviour is a characteristic feature of interpersonal relationships, dependent both on the level of expression of this personality trait and on the social situations (be it a formal or an informal group) the individual confronts (Goran, 2008).

Wikipedia defines empathy as the ability to recognize, perceive and directly feel the emotions of other people. In the same source we find that empathy is the ability to "put oneself into another person's shoes" or "some kind of emotional resonance." In this context, some clarifications of this term are required.

The concept of empathy originates from the German romantic Einfühlung, which means a process of intuitive communication with the world, opposing the rational cognition of the world to the emotional cognition. Later, in the late XIX century and early XX century, the concept was taken by the aestheticians Th. Lipps and W. Worringer, who defined it as "objective joy of self pleasure". In other words, the aesthetic satisfaction does not come from the object, but from the person's self. Einfühlung means that the perception of a sensitive object induces an immediate tendency of the subject to react in a certain way. According to Lipps, the viewer of a gesture of pride, feels, in turn, the same pride (Cramarenco, 2010).

Following Lipps, Tirchener defined empathy as a feeling or projection of self into an object with social implications; empathy was seen as a way to make the environment we live in more humane. Several years later, Woodworth (1938) used empathy as an explanation for optical illusions, noting that to identify the emotions expressed by the faces in the photographs, the observer must imitate their expression and, thus, he/she will realize his/her own emotions. In the first half of the XX century, the concept of empathy was widely used in various fields of psychology, especially in the field of clinical psychology. Freud mentions it in 1905 in Words of Wisdom and in 1921 in Psychology of the Crowd and Self Analysis. Allport (1937) defines empathy as "imaginary transposition of the self in the thinking, emotions and actions of others". However, in 1968 he declared that "the process of empathy is an enigma of social psychology ..." (Aftinica, 1994, p. 32). Carl Rogers is the one who paid a lot of attention to empathy and popularized the concept among clinical psychologists, developing the method of non-directive therapy. The first definition (1958) was: „a clear perception of the internal framework of a person in his emotional components and meanings in such a way as to be felt as though it were that person, without forgetting that it is only *as though*". Later (in 1975) he defined empathy as a process of entering the perceptual world of the other, which allows us to become sensitive to all emotional movements that occur in him/her. In French psychology, the term and concept of empathy are indeed introduced by translating Carl Rogers' works.

In Brunel's opinion (1989), empathy responds to two types of mechanisms: (a) one evokes active verbs like: to notice, to listen, to change, to infer, to conclude, to understand, to interpret and reveals the activation of cognitive processes. In the same way as a a message is received, decoded and understood, people "receive" a complex of emotional indicators which constitute the object of a similar cognitive treatment and make the deduction of an emotional state possible; (b) the second mechanism evokes more passive terms, such as resonance, contamination, sharing, imitation, identification, phenomenon of echo, mirror image and appeals more to emotional experience and to intuition than to reason (Badea, 1998, p. 120).

Currently, there are three different conceptualizations of empathy in psychology:

1. Learning how to be aware of other people's inner states, thoughts, perceptions and motives. The significance of cognitive processes is great and due to these processes a person is able to perceive, recognize and, to a certain level, to anticipate the states of others. In this context the accuracy of empathy is also a topic for discussion.

2. Empathy is an emotional reaction to another person, a "harmonization" of the internal emotional state with another person's state. In this situation the attention is focused on the process of empathy and not on its outcome.

3. Empathy is a combination of cognitive and emotional mechanisms, in which cognitive processes mediate emotional activation. Interpretation of a certain situation triggers an emotional reaction characterized by accepting the other person's perspective. From this point of view, empathy is a nonegocentric understanding of others, led by emotions.

Empathy is the ability to intuit or to recognize the emotions of others. Empathy does not mean experiencing the emotions of others, but understanding their emotions from our experiences; it does not mean identifying with the other, to the detriment of the personality, but transposing in his/her mind and soul in order to understand the perception of reality. It is built on openness to feelings of others, on the ability to read information that comes through nonverbal channels. As is known, nonverbal communication reaches at least 60% in interpersonal communication. Words can express relatively few of people's feelings, which is why empathy is based on the ability to intuit people's feelings, paying great attention to nonverbal type of information: tone of voice, face expressions, gestures, movements etc. It was proved that 90% of the means of expressing affective states are nonverbal. For example, a stressed person has an oscillating tone of voice and reduced intensity, precipitated gestures proving irritation and restlessness. Through empathy it is possible to understand another person better, to intuit his thoughts and emotional experiences, to predict the behavior or even to influence him/her. Empathy appears as a specifically human need (of knowing each other), based on a validated social experience that allows approaches or rejections as a reflex of a possible penetration in the psychology of the other (Badea, 2010, p. 43).

Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2005) argue that empathy is a key competence of social conscience, of social efficiency in daily work. They define empathy as "feeling the emotions of others, understanding their perspectives and active communication and interest in their areas of concern"; and argues that empathy means transforming the beliefs of the people with whom you work into sincere appreciation, the most important thing being that empathy makes resonance possible; and those who are deprived of this empathic capacity act only in ways that give rise to dissonance (p. 53).

Summarizing the data on empathy, S. Marcus believes that the crux of the concept of empathy is the behaviour of reliving the states, thoughts, actions of the other by the self through a process of transposing into the psychology of the partner. Empathy is achieved by the imaginative-ideational transposition into the reference system of the other by following the way of thinking and of achieving the social role. It represents emotional transposition, the action of activating an experience, of substituting in his/her feelings by affective identification of the partner, taking his/her state of mind (Marcus, 1997).

Concluding, we note that being empathic does not mean agreeing with the way others perceive things; it means being able to understand what it is to live what the other lives. The person who is empathic can wear for a moment "the glasses" of the other, being thus

able to understand how to see things through those "glasses". This perception is essential in building and maintaining relationships with others. Of course, it is important that we "take off" the other person's "glasses" after we understand how things are seen and to return to one's own.

The growth of the empathy optimizes the capacity of social interaction, with all its components: good communications skills, conflict negotiation and problem solving; openness to understanding human relationships; cooperation and serviceability. Thus, an empathic person is warm and affectionate and does not feel embarrassed when he sees you crying. He/she also easily admits that he/she also has strong feelings that are difficult to control, therefore he/she shares some of them. He/she trusts you and believes that you can overcome the difficult situations that you go through and reminds you of your strengths when you forget you have them. He/she tries to understand what a certain thing means for you even if the thought of it makes him/her suffer. Empathic people are able to create stronger interpersonal relationships, can motivate themselves and others, perform better as leaders, cope with change easily, create a climate of cooperation, are reconciled with themselves, enjoy the confidence of others, have an emotional connection with group members, create a beneficial emotional resonance.

Analyzing the opinions regarding creating conditions for the development / improvement of teacher's empathic behaviour, we conclude that this will be possible if teachers demonstrate *democratic spirit, communicability, tolerance, responsibility, sensitivity* – qualities that ensure the manifestation of appropriate behaviour in difficult situations and the creation of prerequisites for reducing the destructive effects in stressful situations at work.

The analysis of literature leads to the idea that training teachers to exhibit resistance to professional stress through empathic behaviour ensures the efficiency of education by developing managerial skills and learning strategies of adjusting in order to diminish the stressogenic factors.

In conclusion, teacher training is a complex and important process, an important part of which is learning to reduce occupational stress in professional context. The policies of education, engaged in meaningful reforms on development of human potential include, among the priorities of their agenda, the permanent reconstruction of paradigms of teacher training at the level of some professional skills required to meet the challenges of occupational environment effectively.

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