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CLASSROOM CULTURE OF PERFORMANCE | Empirical study

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Abstract

This article presents the results obtained during an enquiry based on a questionnaire about the classroom culture. This concept it is understood as a micro-society with its own characteristics derived from the dynamic of socialization and training process. This research aims to investigate certain specific aspects of micro-sociology and emphasis on classroom culture. A relatively new concept is reflected by the normative consensus or the integrated system of values that belongs to the teachers, pupils and school, as a social entity. The integrative ensemble of values, class cohesion degree and training strategies are only a few of the aspects described by 62 pupils aged 17-18 years old, from a very prestigious school in Bucharest. The perception of pupils regarding our concept is the effect of the relational practices and training used constantly by the teachers. Those practices reflect the school's focus mostly on cognitive performance.

INTRODUCTION

The classroom culture represents, from a psycho-sociological point of view, an important feature of a social and learning group. This is a dynamic ensemble where multiple formative processes subordinated to the teaching, learning and assessment activities are taking place.

This concept can be defined *as an ensemble of values, beliefs, aspirations, expectations and behaviors, which prevails in classroom, conditioning its performances*. The characteristics of classroom culture are: a) the cohesion-degree (connection of a whole mutual understanding between its members); b) the autonomy of the group-class when it operates independently or it is closely linked to the school culture; c) the normative conformity of the members - the degree of obedience and acceptance towards the group norms; d) the stability of the group – or the sustainability in time, determined by the prescriptions of institutional life; e) the cohesion - class personality as a whole, or a dynamic ensemble regarded as a functional, structural, relational, inter-active structure; f) climate and axiological framework.

THE PURPOSE AND THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH

- Describe the classroom culture as an integrated system of particular values and norms for a learning group;
- Approximate the cohesion degree of classrooms as a result of class social interaction;
- Emphasize the frequency of learning strategies, both competitive and collaborative style.
- Discover the class intervention's strategies in case of critical situations and therefore the elements of the management style used constantly by teachers.

THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

This research was conducted during a meeting with XI and XII grade from a central high school in Bucharest, considered an elite one. The research instrument was an inquiry based on a questionnaire with multiple choices answers. It was applied on 62 pupils, aged between 17 and 18 years.

INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

One of aim of the investigation is to identify the opinions regarding *the cohesion degree of the classroom* and the manner that pupils understand the classmate relationships at the group level (as seen in figure 1).

The answers showed a weak cohesion on the investigated grades (79%), unfortunately a social reality with negative effects upon the sustenance of the relationships. Only 11% of the pupils interviewed showed a high level of cohesion in their groups. The socio-emotional relations are important and reflect in the exchanges feelings of sympathy and rejection. The fundamental characteristic of pupils, in the position of members group, are: spontaneity, honesty, reciprocity needs as well as the manner in whih the inter-personal behavior is asserted.

Regarding the respondents that have an optimal perception about the cohesion degree of the class, an interesting aspect is the source of this unity or cohesion degree (as seen in figure 2)

Common goals (4%), feelings of fellowship (18%), norms and rules (17%) were invoked inequally by pupils. More than that, the existence of stimulating behavior of teachers has elevated the level of answers to 54% (Figure 2).

Social culture of pupils includes the manner of communication as part of the class-group, musical preferences or clothes style, training and games activities. It also contains several adapting strategies of pupils in school as a result of inter-learning system and/ or social experience.

Surprisingly, the alternative connected with *stimulating behavior of the teachers* regarding the increase of cohesion in class hasn't scored any replies. One of the explanations could be given by the fact that elite schools encourage the individualistic culture focused on cognitive high performance (*Stanciulescu*, 1996) The motivational methods are those centered on individual study and competition as well.

The next item aims at suggesting the culture of normative and expressing elements.The expressive culture manifests through (*Păun, 1999*):

- the ensemble of emotions, aspirations that form the ethos/cohesion of the class;
- the symbolic character (rites, rituals, specific ceremonies);
- school stories and myths.

This research reveals subjective opinions and suggestive slogans that reflect the expressive culture of the class. Schools have their own values, formal and informal ceremonies that mark crossing passages between school years of study or celebration of performances, rituals that create strong bonds inside those educational communities. Ceremonies in this school are very complex, selecting cultural values and individual contributions inside the pupils groups, teachers and managers. In this school, there is a large festivity room designed for this purpose.

A less emotional adhesion is the one regarding the *normative culture*, as a set of rules and norms which settles the social life in pupil's class. This

doesn't include the fact that normative culture is under-represented, but the contrary

The autonomy in pupil behavior is a relevant aspect for the school success, as seen in figure 3. Regarding this aspect, understood as an educational value and not as a personal quality, 86% of the respondents consider that they hold this feature developed as a practical ability in school activity. For the segment of undecided respondents, this level is quite elevated. About 2% show that there is no understanding upon the significance of pupil's autonomy or the manner in which this is perceived as a school culture's value.

The rules and norms belong to any school organization (*Coulon*, 1993); they cannot be absent from the pupils' class, because they represent the foundation of activities' efficiency. They are also visible aspects of class management. As seen in figure 4, 25% of the pupils consider that official norms imposed by schools are the only inner operation legitimate mode like the student service or moral conduct code.

Regarding the rules negotiations, there are 25% that show the need of pupils to create a personalized rule. Those are the results of norms transgression. Almost 50% people questioned, and they made an optimal choice of organization, a formal and nonformal rules in combination.

Another goal of this questionnaire is the identification of *the source of motivation* regarding learning activity. The lack of motivation represents one of the factors that generate a deficient management with influence on individual performances and upon the participation level during class activities.

Motivation can be defined as the selection persistence and direction of the behavior, therefore it is easy to identify the level of pupil motivation by the teachers. As seen in figure 5, in this study, the *preparation for the future profession* recorded 62% of replies. Next there is the influence and expectation of their parents which accumulate 16%. An interesting place is occupied by a better position in class hierarchy with 14%.

FIgure 5. Motivational pupil sources

Regarding the values set promoted within the pupils group, the most popular are the collaborative participation, competition and altruism or selflessness.

The representation on school success is attained by performance standards formally established. It is about a negative orientation of motivations because there isn't any motivational principle which can sustain the external references points.In figure 6, it can be shown a link between the need for performance and the competition spirit for 33% and 35%, which prove that pupils have as a first priority school performance.

The interest for collaborative activity is chosen by 15% of the respondents, and selflessness by only

15%. 2 % preferred to offer other answers choices like the sense of humor, respect or popularity.

The teaching culture as a part of school culture is an extremely rich perimeter with diversified components in the values level as well. Action orientation stimulates the competition and it is based on acknowledge teachers and pupils academic success. Encourage and support self development, building a self awareness on teachers and school to achieve a better result in quality, the participative leadership, the significance of local community and parents as school partners. And the list is still open, but it shows the fact that efficiency and teaching quality act, depends on a very strong orientated culture to increase the development.

Classrooms are structured groups where they are working alone or they compete and collaborate with others to obtain the rewards given by the teachers for their successfully solving the task. From the traditional point of view, competitions situations were considered to be at a higher level of the motivation scale.

A group activity is a stimulating way for each individual generating a contagious behavior. Inter-activity means competition, defined as a motivational self affirmation, as well as cooperation, socially and orientated activity where the individual collaborates with others to attain a common purpose or similar goal.

Regarding teaching strategies, like collaboration and competitive learning, we conclude that there is a balance in the application of those. This fact demonstrated that *interactive teaching strategies* are applied by teachers who are acting upon social skills development.

Teachers from elite schools make considerably investments in training using the modern principles from the teaching paradigm. Generally and efficient training and socialization practice are about collaborative teaching strategies (Snowman, Biehler, 2006). The advantages are: focus on pupils, motivation for learning and support in the socialization process in class.

The diagram from figure 7, shows explicitly the option of teachers and pupils for class organization forms.

Training strategies are seen as a key possibility in maximizing the process of learning. New approaches promoted conduct to an increasing independence level of pupil and collaborations in group activities also.*The grouping* places pupils in different areas of the classroom to attain particular learning objectives.

The *social representation of pupils* regarding the ideal type of teacher is part of the class ethos. In their opinion, the ideal teacher is dynamic and communicative (64%) and manifests tolerance towards pupils when it comes to the lack of obedience school demands (only 8%). 26 % put

accent on professional competence of teachers (Fig. 8).

As it is seen in figure 9, the ideal image of the pupil encouraged by teachers is as following: on the first place, with 39%, the pupils are intelligent, 34% disciplined, 19% pupils that make effort.

Regarding *educational crisis*, scientific literature identified a few intervention strategies used by teachers to solve, diminish, appease or eliminate the critical situations inside the classroom group.

The intervention of teachers strategies have as a target:

− To allow an optimal adaptation of pupils to common collective rules;
− To stimulate the individual initiative or the micro groups;
− To support the dynamics of the class at inter-personal level (like opinions, feelings, interests, attitudes);
− To motivate those initiatives that allow to eliminate some age specific tendencies, aggressive behavior, isolation, day dreaming, negativism;
− To correct undesirable behavior;
− To accept plurality of opinions.

There are a series of intervention strategies that appear in literature where we can distinguish the most representative, the domination strategy made through un-symmetrical relational structures and behavior based on prestige and authority (*Iucu, 2006*). Others are referring to:

- *Negotiations* as a two sides meeting form;
- *Fraternization* - a method that is about the teachers' incapacity of authority that makes an alliance with pupils offering a very strange space of interacting in practice;
- *The strategy based on ritual and routine* creates the so called predictable teacher who grounds his interventions on uniformity and standards;
- *Occupational therapy* – ergo therapy that increases the dynamic of the class especially at physical level, cultivating exercises as the best intervention and treatment;
- *Moral support strategy* who emphasize the moral function of open discussions associated to school success with the social one.

In figure 10, it is evident that moral support of the class is certainly the most common method of solving a crisis situation for 54 %, followed by the negotiations possibility and interceding of 26%. Domination and rewards to stimulate, showed smaller percentages of only 14%, and 5%. We notice here the traditional concept according to which the authority style is a benefit when it is used as a corrective purpose, of negative reinforcement of undesirable behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

As a result of this research, there were formulated a few *conclusions* with an important practical and educational value:

a. Teachers should diminish the competition and stimulate pupils to learn using cooperation instead.
b. Teachers should combine the mandatory norms with the subjective ones having as a goal the development of social competence.
c. Teachers should create the cohesion of the class trough learning strategies and management techniques.
d. Teachers should stimulate behavior whose effect is a free expression of their own ideas, self confidence, and social creativity.
e. Other refers to create a safe climate especially when pupils have some negative experiences or high educational risk.
f. To create examples of substantial combinations of teaching methods through socialization inside the class and between the classes (learning in pairs, in groups or independent learning as well with a ICT support).
g. Building a teaching plan that combines the formal and informal learning experiences.

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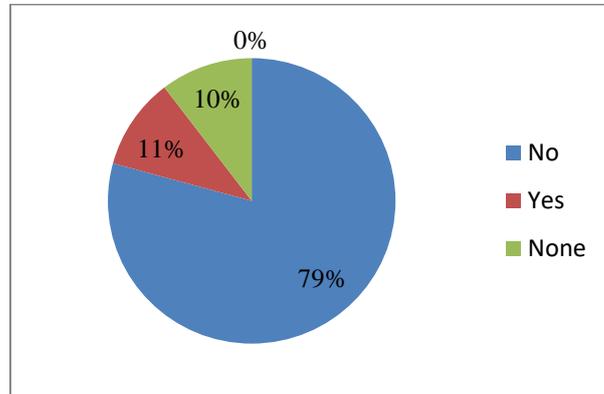
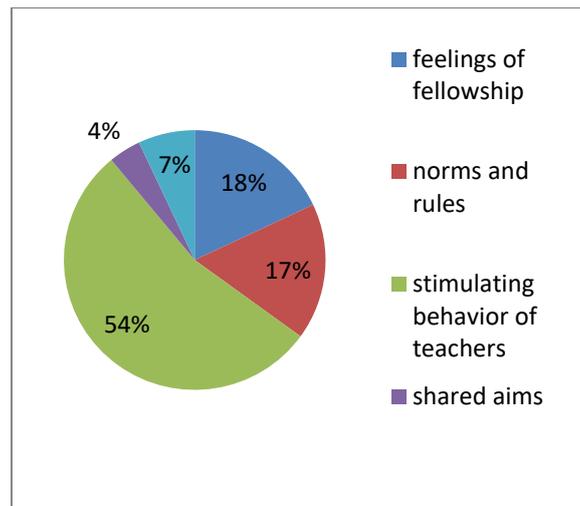**ANNEXES**

Fig. 1. Classroom cohesion

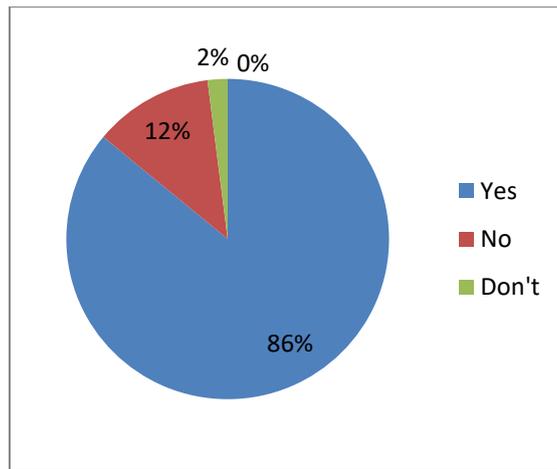**Fig. 2. Sources of classroom cohesion**
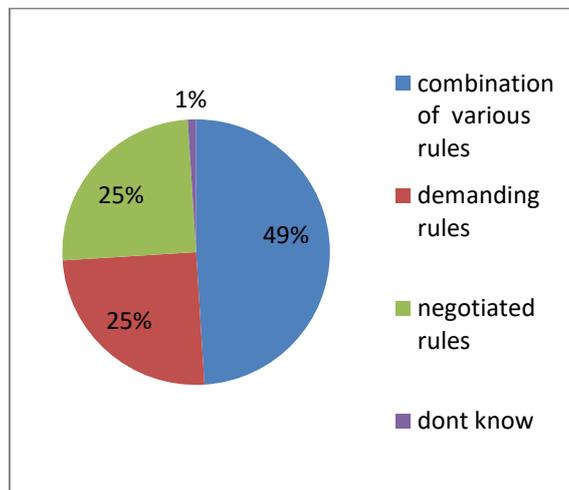
Fig. 3. The autonomy in pupil's behaviour

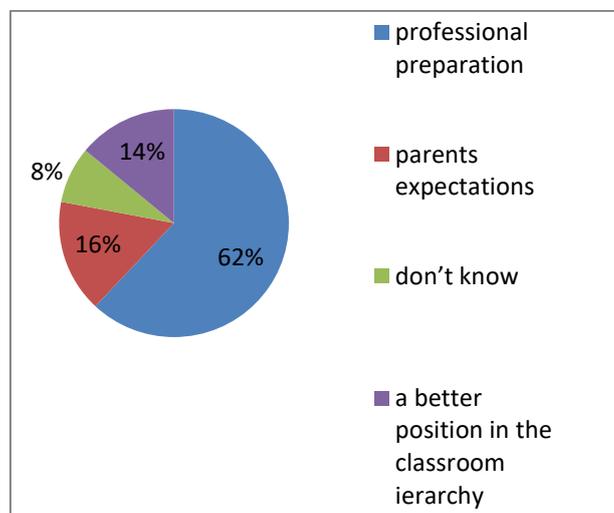**Figure 4. The typology of norms and rules**
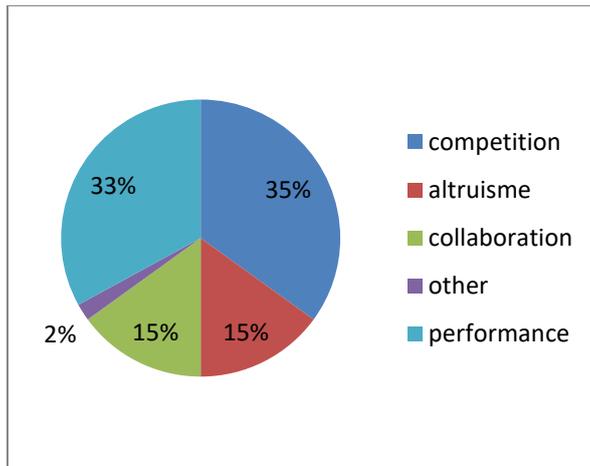
Fig. 5. Motivational pupil sources

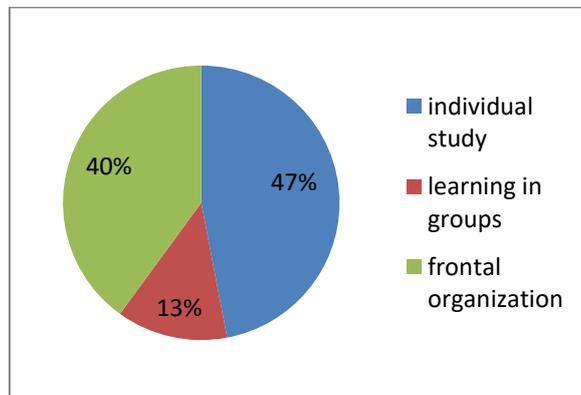**Fig. 6. Values promoted in classroom**
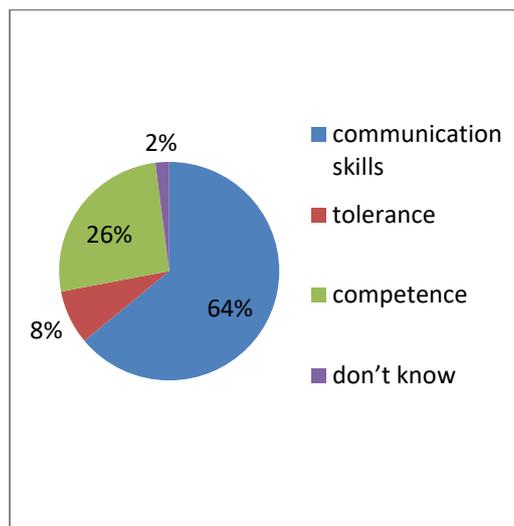

Fig 7. Organization forms

Fig. 8. Social representation of the teacher from pupil's point of view
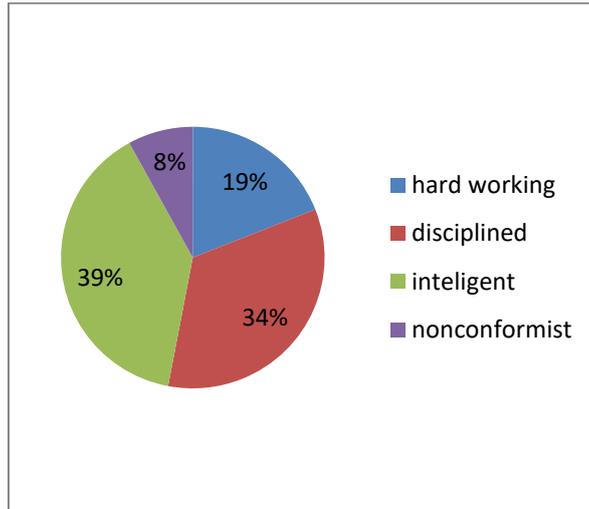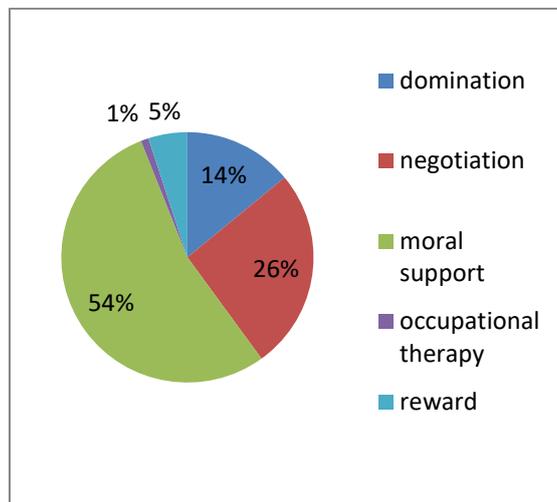
Fig. 9 The ideal image of pupils in teachers' opinion

Figure 10. Educative approach of crisis situations