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Education, Reflection, Development**QUALITATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW CONCERNING PSYCHO-
SOCIAL FACTORS OF THE STUDENT – TEACHER
RELATIONSHIP**

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Abstract

This theoretical study aims to investigate the connection formed between the variables: social connectedness, self-esteem and life satisfaction in the context of teacher-student relationships (TSR). The analysis is based on the following research questions: (1) Which are the most significant individual psycho-social factors indicated in the literature that can be related with the life satisfaction in the context of teacher-student relationship, and (2) How can these factors be integrated in the theoretical fundamentals of a further scientific investigation of the TSR perception and expectations of Romanian college students. After performing a critical analysis of a number of papers, the results indicated that a positive teacher-student relationship, i.e. where students feel safe to self-disclose different personal matters, can lead to a better communication and problem solving among them, but it can also have a multitude of benefits to students in terms of their academic life, such as academic motivation, learning and teaching processes, as well as on the functioning of their interpersonal connections.

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1. Introduction

Human beings have a natural inclination into forming relations with others and into getting close to other people as much as it is possible (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mellor et al., 2008). Interpersonal relationships can have a strong effect on the degree of personal life satisfaction. As social beings, people need to form connections and to be connected to one another through different relationships. In some cases, based on various reasons, some people have difficulties in forming relationships with others around them, this leading further to problematic aspects, beginning with their personal life, social life and especially their mental health, e.g. The lack of relationships can lead to loneliness. Loneliness is defined as "...the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity" (Perlman & Peplau, 1984, pp. 292, as cited in Salimi, 2011). Some authors identify two types of loneliness: emotional and social loneliness, where emotional loneliness refers to "the lack of close or intimate relationships" and social loneliness refers to the "inadequate access to social relationships such as a network of peers, coworkers, neighbours, or friends" (Weiss, 1973, pp. 2, as cited in Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015). A study performed by Salimi (2011) regarding social-emotional loneliness and life satisfaction indicated that life satisfaction was negatively predicted by social and emotional loneliness. Life satisfaction is defined as a global assessment of a person quality of life according to his chosen criteria (Shin & Johnson, 1978, as cited in Diener et al., 1985). The lack of social relationships, therefore the feeling of isolation can have direct effects on human body and behaviors, leading to negative impact on human health (House et al., 1988). Being part of a certain relationship can improve the levels for social support we receive through our lives. Social support was found to positively predict greater life satisfaction in females in a study (Kong et al., 2014). Another important role in life satisfaction levels is occupied by self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kong et al., 2014; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013; Zhang & Leung, 2002).

2. Problem Statement

An important part of the social life of young adults, such as college students, is represented by the school environment, particularly by the relationships they experience with their peers and their teachers. The teacher-student relationship (TSR), if functional and positively perceived, can have a great significance for both learners and teachers. First of all, for both participants in this form of interpersonal interaction, students and teachers, a functional relationship can increase their sense of belongingness and social connectedness, e.g. students feel like they are better understood and cared for, and for the teachers, it can increase their job performance and motivation, reduces emotional exhaustion (Taxer et al., 2019). For students, a positive relationship with their teachers can lead to an increased level of academic motivation, better relationships in the school environment and out of it, and a more positive attitude towards school (Wilkins, 2014), as well as less aggressive tendency in social contexts (Hughes & Cavell, 1999). Teacher-student relationships change as the participants to that specific relationship mature over time in terms of individuals and of their shared and non-shared social experiences. As Hagenauer and Volet (2014) describe, there are two main dimensions that characterise TSR in university: the affective dimension and the support dimension.

3. Research Questions

The main research questions guiding this theoretical paper are: (1) Which are the most significant individual psycho-social factors that can be related with the life satisfaction in the context of teacher-student relationship, and (2) How can these factors be integrated in the theoretical fundamentals of a further scientific investigation of the TSR perception and expectations of Romanian college students.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this theoretical study is to perform a qualitative investigation of the literature, focusing on variables that, as indicated in the literature and in a previous study performed by the authors (Puțaru & Rusu, 2021), can play an important role in terms of quality of life of people experiencing interpersonal relationships: social support and self-esteem. Specifically, the study aims to bring theoretical support for the connection between the variables social connectedness, self-esteem and life satisfaction in the context of teacher-student relationships.

5. Research Methods

The study is based on a theoretical approach of critically analysing several papers addressing the variables social connectedness, self-esteem and life satisfaction, in relation to teacher-student relationship in higher education environment.

6. Findings

In terms of social connectedness, which is commonly defined as as the experience of belonging to a social relationship or network (Lee & Robbins, 1995), literature indicates that part of the reasons people may display lower levels of connectedness are earlier experiences of abandonment, peer rejection, isolation or criticism (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Lee et al., 2001). Having a low or high level of social connectedness can influence if a person will easily interact with other people or not, if they tend to avoid social interactions or if they will find it easy to communicate and form new connections with other persons (Lee & Robbins, 1998). People with a low level of social connectedness do not feel like they belong when they find themselves in a group and it appears that they have a hard time relating to others (Lee et al., 2001). Lower levels of the belonging feeling can lead to psychological and physical difficulties (Arslan, 2018; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), suicide or attempt of suicide (Durkheim, 1897, as cited in Baumeister & Leary, 1995), to lower self reported levels of happiness and adjustment, and to higher stress levels (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In schools, the belonging feeling of students was associated with their levels of motivation for school, satisfaction and positive feelings. Lower levels of connectedness are associated to dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors (DIB) (Kohut, 1984, as cited in Lee et al., 2001). DIB are indicated to be more present in a person the more anxiety that person is feeling towards a situation (McLemore & Brokaw, 1987). Baumeister and Leary (1995) investigated the need to belong and whether the meeting of this need does play a role in the type of feelings a person has. The

results indicate that lower levels of social connectedness can lead to higher levels of anxiety in a person, and the more a person has anxiety the higher is the level of DIB (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In a study of the effects of age and gender on self-esteem and life satisfaction, it was highlighted that life satisfaction is influenced as much by gender as it is by age, indicating that male participants had a level of life satisfaction higher than female participants; moreover, the authors noticed that life satisfaction of adolescents was more strongly correlated with collective self-esteem compared with senior participants, for which life satisfaction presented a more meaningful relationship with individual self-esteem (Zhang & Leung, 2002). The same results were confirmed by a more recent study that showed that adolescent male participants have a higher self-esteem and life satisfaction than female participants (Moksnes & Espnes, 2013). This means that in future studies we might notice gender differences in students regarding the perception of teacher-student relationship.

Significant differences regarding the levels of belonging need and satisfaction in personal relationships can indicate the presence of a certain level of loneliness (Mellor et al., 2008). The association between belonging need, loneliness, relationship satisfaction, and life satisfaction indicated that the belonging need was positively associated with higher levels of loneliness; lower satisfaction in personal relationships was associated with higher levels of loneliness (Mellor et al., 2008). Friendship relationships people develop with the others around them and their quality can influence the level of life satisfaction they perceive (Amati et al., 2018). Moreover, studies that looked at the connection between our relationships and life satisfaction indicate that the quality of our relationships with our parents influences in a higher degree life satisfaction levels (in adolescents) (Ma & Huebner, 2008; Fu Keung Wong et al., 2010).

Other variables with an important role for life satisfaction are: age, social support, especially support from parents, (Heng et al., 2020), self-esteem (Fu Keung Wong et al., 2010). In a research that studied the connection between relationships and life satisfaction, it was demonstrated that the relationship with parents can have great impact on life satisfaction of emergent adults; in the same study, it was indicated that romantic relationships have a great significance, most probably because they become an important part in the lives of young people who try to find a significant other (Guarnieri et al., 2014). Therefore, we can ask the question whether self-esteem can influence the type and level of self disclosure persons make in their relations with others?

Jourard and Lasakow (1958) have defined self-disclosure as “the process of making the self-known to other persons”. Self-disclosure is an important part of our relationships as they have the role to help us develop and establish common “ground” that will ultimately help us to communicate easier and more effectively with each other. There are many reasons for which a person might avoid to self-disclose to another: the thought that the other person might have a low self-esteem and in consequence their response to their disclosure would not meet their expectances (MacGregor, & Holmes, 2011), the level of loneliness etc. (Ginter, 1982, as cited in Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). Several authors found that the level of self-esteem has an impact on the self-disclosure levels a person might have (Dolgin et al., 1991; Gaucher et al., 2012; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). On the other hand, there are studies that found that self-esteem is not a decisive factor with regard to the level of self-disclosures a person may share with others (Fitzgerald, 1963; Nwanosike & Nwankwo, 2018). Through self-disclosures, people can reveal a

various multitude of information about each other from personal experiences in the past to dreams about the future, but one of the most important information that can be shared through self disclosures and which can help us getting to know each other more and lower our levels of depression or heighten our self-esteem and life satisfaction (Gross & John, 2003). Forest and Wood (2011) have described the term expressivity as “the combination of self-disclosure and expression of emotion”. Self-disclosures are an important part of all types of relationships, including the student-teacher relationship, taking into consideration that the relationship between teachers and students may be not expected to require so many personal/emotional information known about each other. As indicated by Goldstein and Benassi (1994), self-disclosures predicted student participation in class for the 64 teachers in their classes and 1706 students.

TSRs are developed and are defined by the time that is shared between the participants in the relation, by the interaction rules and the main subject that is discussed. In some cases, the teacher may spend more hours a day with his/her students or may spend just a few hours a week with them. The more time is spent together, the more discussions may arise during which the participants may get to know each other better. As mentioned before, students participation is increased when teachers self-disclose information about themselves (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Even if the university students may not get to spend too much time with their teachers as compared to primary and high school students, familiarity and a certain degree of shared personal information can help the students to feel more connected with their teacher, which can help them to improve their academic work. In accordance with the student involvement theory the student involvement and the level of institutional connectedness are positively correlated (Astin, 1984, as cited in Farrell et al., 2018).

Another important factor in developing a positive relationship with students that can increase social connectedness is authenticity (congruence) between a person’s behaviour and his/her actions. By this we refer to a behaviour that is more close to the behaviour one person demonstrates in the day to day life, of course within reason and with the right examples. The first learning tool children develop is the observation of one’s behaviour and the imitation as described by Piaget in the developmental stages of intelligence (Piaget, 1936, as cited in Joubish & Khurram, 2011). Even if young adults have developed over time different tools and techniques of learning, observation is still an important aspect in people’s lives; we refer to other people when we are in a new situation and we do not know how to behave by observing how they will act; we imitate other people’s style, behaviour or manners when we see them acting in a way we like or dislike. Gladstone and Cimpian (2021) studied the effectiveness of role models to students; they described in their article a set of theories that ultimately explain that students’ motivation is influenced by their role models, finding that the “role models’ competence, their similarity to students, and the attainability of their STEM career” (Gladstone & Cimpian, 2021, p. 9) are the most important characteristics that can influence students’ STEM motivation (STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Regarding the role model competence, however, the authors found that if the role model was highly competent the students were demotivated; this is an important aspect to be taken into account in TSR in universities, where the role models are usually successful in their domains. Another important factor in TSR is the perception of likeability, i.e. being liked or disliked by another person. In a study that looked at the perceived status regarding the degree in which a person sees herself

as being liked or not by his/her teacher, identified that this perception can influence the academic achievements of students and also the quality of TSR (Davis & Lease, 2007). Our perception about what others think about us can influence many aspects, leading with the way we behave with those around us, how we behave in our relationships, our beliefs about a certain person, our motivation to keep interacting with that person, our self-esteem, the level of perceived social connectedness, life satisfaction and lastly how we will behave in our future relationships with others. As illustrated by Bronfenbrenner's (1974) theory of ecological systems regarding human development, interpersonal relationships are influenced by the persons' thoughts regarding themselves, their history regarding relationships with other people and other persons historic as well, their moods or by other people, events, the environment that relationships develops and by the rules of that environment. Also, at a proximate level, TSR can be influenced by aspects of the direct interaction between the teacher and students, such as the enthusiasm of the teacher regarding the subject taught, the student's mood, their degree of tiredness etc.

According to the literature, another factor that can influence the dynamic of TSR is the level of perceived social social connectedness, in relation to the level of self-disclosure. As indicated above, self-disclosure can play an important role in the development of human relationships. It is important to take into account that teacher student relationship does not have the same characteristics and requirements as other types of relationships in terms of disclosures, attachment, time spent together, intimacy etc. Regarding the level of social connectedness of students, according to Yavrutürk et al. (2020), the relevant factors of the social connectedness in schools are: the teachers, school climate, social support and, in a lower degree, the friends and the family. The four components of school climate have been identified as it follows (Cohen, 2012): security (rules, norms, physical security, socio-emotional security), relationships (respect for diversity, social support: adults and students, leadership), learning and teaching (social, emotional, ethical, civic learning), and the institutional environment (social connectedness,/commitment, psysical soroundings)

Lammers and Smith (2008) have investigated a series of variables regarding the influence of teachers, students and physical environment on learning, taking into consideration the aspects related to TSR. From the perspective of students, a number of 10 variables refering to teachers counted in terms of positive and functional TSR: their enthusiasm, knowledge on the subject they taught, their level of interest regarding the subject, respect, approachability, ability to notice/answer questions, patience, their way of speaking, the ability to anticipate students difficulties regarding the understandment of the new concepts and control over class (Lammers & Smith, 2008).

7. Conclusion

In the literature analysed in this study, the components of school climate are the aspects that are the most important for the development of social connectedness in schools and the development of positive relationships between teachers, teachers and students, and between students. The development of a positive school climate by improving the feeling of security of students, has the potential to enhance and enrich the interpersonal relationships of students and teachers by addressing social connectedness, by creating an environment where students can have the necessary confidence to self-disclose, thus fostering

a healthy teacher-student relationship and helping solving difficulties that students may have before they lead to unwelcomed results.

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