THE INFLUENCE OF A SOCIAL – PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING ON A GROUP ATMOSPHERE

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Abstract

We have realized the experiment as a form of a social – psychological training (SPT) with university students – future teachers (140 participants). Their average age was 22.3 years. We have tried to find out the influence of SPT on a group atmosphere of a trained group based on the comparison of continuous and block forms of training. The experimental group was made up of 69 participants divided into four smaller groups (EG1 – EG4) to which SPT has been implemented in 96 hours appropriations. A continuous form of training has been implemented in EG 1 –EG 2 and a block form of training has been implemented in EG 3-EG 4. The control group was made up of 71 participants divided into four smaller groups without SPT implementation. After the SPT we have found out that SPT has improved a group atmosphere by using A Group Atmosphere Scale. Both forms of SPT had similarly significant influence on a group atmosphere.
Key words: *social – psychological training (SPT), group atmosphere.*

Introduction

The ways of improvement of education of a man focused on the best preparation for continual changes in today´s society are characteristic for a modern pedagogical area. The most necessary demand is to teach pupils to solve and cope with different problems at school and in other social groups without an aggression and force. Therefore it is very important to teach them to use the proper social abilities to solve those situations.

A big attention is paid to the social relationships formed by the participants of an educational process. If there are not favourable relationships between a teacher and a pupil, the education of different age categories will be difficult. The relationships are also important in the forming of a group atmosphere. Its quality has a great impact on the effectiveness of the aims of an educational group.

We want to point out the initial information that the man as a social being is dependant on groups in order to integrate into a society. A group work is a suitable methodical approach of an acquirement of the social abilities. One of the ways of preparation of teachers is having their own experience with a group form of work such as social-psychological training (SPT). They would educate and teach in the class, form an effective group, which would be able to realize the targets and to learn the social abilities.

Hermochová (1988a) defines SPT as a systematic and planning approach of forming a group process and behaviour. According to Hermochová (1981) there exists a three-level process of SPT, during which:

- the participants of a training enter the socially secure situation, release themselves, and that enables different behaviour than usually
- they try new forms of behaviour in a state of inner release

- they decide to practice those forms of behaviour which they consider the most effective.

The above mentioned author describes the basic characteristics of a social-psychological training such as:

1. an intentional simulation of social relations in a micro-background of a trained group,
2. the use of a group dynamics,
3. an intensive enhancing of the process of a social learning,
4. a stimulation of the process of social learning by providing a good atmosphere and a psychological security,
5. the benefits of the role of the member of a group (Hermochová, 1988a).

SPT is a form of social learning, in which various games, exercises, activities, case and problem-study-situations are used. Their content depends on predefined aims of our training. We can briefly say that the main aim is to optimalize behaviour of a man in a relationship with other people.

The aims of trainings are focused on an increase of abilities to perceive a social reality, on a functional expression of emotions, on a deepening of a self-concept and understanding the others, on a change of inconvenient stereotypes in behaviour, a self-acceptance and an acceptance of the others, on realizing of the incentives of behaviour, open interpersonal relationships, training of constructive solving of conflicts and effective strategies of coping with stressful situations, a training of an effective communication, training an assertive behaviour, empathy, improving a group atmosphere, understanding a group process and a group dynamics.

A social-psychological training assumes the fact that the social learning exists in each group interaction. It is important to add, that the complex kind of learning, which consists of a new concept and understanding, thinking of new circumstances, new attitudes and abilities, proceeds in learning a new behaviour. It is important to identify with an idea, that despite the fact, that it is difficult to change the ways of the stereotypes we have used for a long time, it is possible to change the man´s behaviour.

The processes during SPT enable to reach the given aims. Hermochová (1988b) says about the following ones:

1. Perceiving one´s own feelings - we do not realize our own feelings, in spite of the fact they are the part of each reaction to the changes around us. The SPT uses the methods of a sense-perception and increases the sensitivity of perception (e.g. relaxation exercises).

2. Direct expression of feelings – an immediate expression of feelings is an important step in a process of a human development. It is necessary to enable the members of a group to express their feelings and then other members could accept those feelings.

3. Face-to-faceness – an open self-presentation enables to realize the contribution of so called role- behaviour and a spontaneous behaviour.

4. Feedback – is a basic process in a social learning, but we emphasize the strict rules of an effective feedback.

5. Creating a framework – the SPT does not only deal with an emotional, but also with a sensible and rational side which influence a man´s behaviour.

6. Solidarity – an intensive experience of mutual closeness enables experiments with behaviour and its following changes.

7. Responsible dependence – an experience of each member´s importance for other members of a training especially of those participants who feel less important and less worth.

8. Learning by observation and reception – the participant, who does not obviously take part in a group interaction, can have experiences and gain new knowledge and attitudes.

9. Revelation of similarities with other members of a group – a determination of similar problems in social relations gives us a certain kind of security.

10. Own initiative in a choice of activity – if the participants are forced to do any activities, they form defense mechanism, if they choose a training on their own, they have more experiences.

11. Learning by model- model situations enable to train new behaviour in a given and objective situation.

12. Experiment with a new behaviour - courageous participants, who want to try new ways of behaviour, can apply experiences in a real life.

13. Optimism – provides the feeling that we can learn some new forms of behavior with a help of a group.

We agree with Průcha (1997) who describes the educational background as the set of psycho-social influences and relationships which impact the educational processes. They reflect the quality of a background and a learning atmosphere as a varied psycho-social inner variable of an educational background (short-term influence on the content and the character of a communication among participants of a training) and the qualities of learning atmosphere as static psycho-social inner variables of an educational background (permanent social relations among the participants of a training).

Although a group atmosphere reflects the quality of a social background of the group, it is one of the remarkable factors of a group impact and comfort of the members of a group. It is an outcome of a balance between a tension and a cohesion of a group.

The character of relationships in a group (among the members of a group, among the leader of a group and the members of a group) and own experience with relationships are shown in a group atmosphere. We can agree on an open atmosphere, comfort, trust, cooperation, solidarity. On the other side there is also the atmosphere of hostility, distrust, tension and competition.

Kollárik (1990) understands a group atmosphere as an inner sign of each group, which has wide social characteristics- from a social background of a group reflecting the level and the quality of a group life, through the relationship with work and mutual emotional and social relationships inside a group, a social acceptance and incorporation of the members of a group, to the factors which specify the character and the quality of a social atmosphere.

We totally agree with the opinion of a famous social psychologist Bandura, who emphasizes a human behaviour as socially situated and which exists in a rich social content and its reflection is hardly conditioned. It requires the analyze of psycho – social determinants and controlling mechanisms of the existence of people and groups of people (Bandura, 2002).

Forming an effective training group is important to make the programme successful. Zelina (1995) says about the following features of the effectiveness of groups:
- the atmosphere in a group is informal, members feel relaxed and comfortable,
- the members discuss a lot and the content of their discussions is aimed at group´s objectives,
- all members of the group understand the objectives of the group,
- the members listen to each other openly,
- the decisions are accepted after a group agrees, formal voting is rare,
- a criticism is frequent, but it is sincere and constructive,
- the comprehensible tasks are given,
- the leader of a group does not dominate, a group is subordinated to him,
- the group understands the aims, tasks and objectives.

The effectiveness of a social-psychological training depends on a willingness of the participants of the training to cooperate, on a formal qualitative readiness of the SPT, on a readiness of a trainer and on many other factors. However, the most important fact is that, whether the participants of a training would be able to use the newly- learnt social abilities in a real life.

Methodology of Research

We have operated the SPT with future teachers focused on reducing the anxiety and developing social abilities from the point of the improvement of a self-perception and the improvement of a perception of others, a communication, a cooperation, effective solutions of a conflict and social situations.

Research Goals

The aim of research was to find out how a SPT influences a group atmosphere in practiced groups. We supposed the changes in the level of a group atmosphere after the SPT intervention, as well as the differences in the level of a group atmosphere related to the form of SPT (continuous form, block form).

Research Sample

The research sample was constituted of 140 participants – students of the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra, future teachers with an average age of 22.3 years. The experimental group (EG) was made up of 69 participants divided into four smaller groups (EG1 to EG4) to which social – psychological training was implemented in 96 hrs appropriation. In EG1 – EG2 was implemented continuous form of training (4 hours per week during two terms), in EG3-EG4 a block form of training (4 three-day meetings during two terms) was implemented.

The control group (CG) was made up of 71 participants divided into four smaller groups (CG1 to CG4), without a SPT implementation.

Research Instrument and Measurement

A group atmosphere was checked by the Group Atmosphere Scale (Kollárik, Červenka, Farkaš, Kopal, 1992). The measurements of a group atmosphere in experimental groups were implemented prior to social – psychological training intervention and consequently after its termination. In control groups the measurements were parallel with those in experimental groups but without social - psychological intervention.

Results of Research

We anticipated significant differences in the levels of a group atmosphere compared before and after the intervention of the SPT.

In the experimental groups EG1 ($Z = 3.416$ **; $p = 0,001$), EG2 ($Z = 2.652$ **; $p = 0,008$) and EG4 ($Z = 3.444$ **; $p = 0,001$) the positive change in the level of an overall group atmosphere at 1% level of significance is shown after the completion of the social-psychological training. There was a significant positive change in the level of an overall atmosphere after the SPT in 0.1% level of significance in the experimental group EG3 ($Z = 3.737$ ***; $p = 0,000$) (see Table 1).

The significant negative changes in the level of a group atmosphere at 5% level of significance ($Z = 2.363$ *; $p = 0,018$) were found in the control group CG1. In the control groups CG2 – CG4 no statistically significant changes were demonstrated (see Table 2).

According to the social-psychological form of the training, we expected significant differences in levels of a group atmosphere of participants after the training intervention of the SPT.

In the first measurement before the intervention of the SPT, we have not seen significant differences in the atmosphere between the members of groups of both forms of the SPT. After the intervention of the SPT a positive shift in the level of a group atmosphere was reflected among the members of both forms of the SPT, but compared the two forms of training, significant differences between groups in overall level of group atmosphere were not demonstrated (see Table 3).

Table 1. **Results of a group atmosphere scale measurements in the experimental groups (N = 69).**

	Measurement before SPT			Measurement after SPT				
	Mean	Standard	Deviation	Mean	Standard	Deviation	Z	p
EG1	60.29	6.25		72.76	5.84		3.416**	0.001
EG2	58.22	7.56		64.28	5.63		2.652**	0.008
EG3	57.39	8.56		65.05	7.01		3.737***	0.000
EG4	63.06	3.57		69.62	3.59		3.444**	0.001

Legend (holding for Table1 1 to 3): EG1-4 – experimental groups, CG1-4 – control groups, Z – value of Wilcoxon test for dependant files, p – level of signification, t – pared samples test, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 2. **Results of a group atmosphere scale measurements in the control groups (N=71).**

	Measurement before SPT			Measurement after SPT				
	Mean	Standard	Deviation	Mean	Standard	Deviation	Z	p
CG1	61.94	8.27		58.66	5.22		2.363*	0.018
CG2	59.68	6.36		56.78	8.63		1.128	0.259
CG3	64.11	7.86		61.50	10.66		0.873	0.382
CG4	63.37	4.33		62.31	3.68		0.650	0.516

Table 3. **Results of a group atmosphere scale measurements in the groups of continuous and block forms of training.**

	Running form of training N=35		Block form of training N=34			
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	p
pretest	59.23	6.93	60.06	7.20	0.488	0.627
posttest	68.40	7.10	67.20	6.04	0.751	0.455

There was a positive change on the level of a group atmosphere in each experimental groups. The participants appreciate more productive, more interesting and more successful atmosphere.

However, there was one negative change in a group atmosphere in one of the four control groups. The members admitted less cooperation, interests and mutual support.Both forms of social-psychological training had a similarly significant influence on a group atmosphere.

Discussion and Conclusion

The positive changes in the atmosphere have been revealed in friendships, sincere relationships, mutual cooperation, support and acceptance, satisfaction and enthusiasm. This fact has come up to our expectations.

Despite the fact that the positive change in a group atmosphere has been obvious after both forms of the SPT, we didn´t find significant differences in a group atmosphere among the groups. There have probably been other factors that have more intense influence on the changes of a group atmosphere than the form of training (block or continuous). There belong experience of learning, emotionally safe background, gamesomeness at model situations, possibility to express own feelings and being support of other members of a group and a feedback. The effectiveness of a training depends not only on its objective, content or type, but it is also influenced by the variables such as the leader, the members of a group, their motivation, their personal interest and willingness to cooperate. The above mentioned variables participate in a development of a group dynamics and so on.A positive group atmosphere is important for an effective function of a group. It is often an incentive for the members of a group. It also presents the source of positive being and living, self-reflection, perception of the others and satisfaction of needs.We agree with Kollárik (1992), who claims that the whole group atmosphere does not represent only the factor which influences the success of a group, but it is also the indicator of a group development and the level of an active influence on an individual and on his ability to cope with various influential factors

According to this results and the earlier-published results (e.g. Hamranová, 2002a, 2002b, 2003) we are able to state that the social-psychological training does support a positive group atmosphere and affects the whole character of life in a group, mutual emotional and social relationships in it, and thus it influences the effectiveness and objectives of a group.

Many other psychologists (e.g. Gajdošová, 2002; Šramová, 2001, 2004) suggest the necessity to create effective educational strategies, programmes and trainings during the education of trainers and teachers focused on the improvement of social abilities. We can manage the conditions for a healthy psychological and social development of pupils by reducing a tension, creating a positive social atmosphere at school, by a sincere and open communication and friendly relationships between a teacher and pupils.

Acknowledgment

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