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The Rogerian Student-Centered Learning Approach and the Democratization of Education

Abstract: The authors of this article reiterate the question of the best holistic approach for democratising relationships in a learning community developing students' social-emotional competence on the one hand, and developing students' academic competence on the other. Democratization of education and Social and emotional learning are well-researched issues. They have been elements present in school curricula for several decades, yet it remains difficult to make them a reality. Rogers was focused on finding the components of interaction that facilitate authentic and meaningful interpersonal relationships. As a result of his research, he singled out the 'cornerstones' of the Person-Centered/Pupil-Centered Approach (PCA): inter alia non-directivity, classroom climate setting, congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard, among others. This psychologist also pointed out how to work with a group and in a group so that an environment for meaningful learning, well-being, and democratic relationships is created.

Keywords: person-centered approach; democratization of education; education/learning; teacher professional development

Preludium

In this paper, we aim to examine the assumption that the Person-Centered Approach (PCA)—developed by Carl Ransom Rogers—can bring the democratization of education into the school setting as well as foster social and emotional learning therein. Since its 'modern' shape, school appears to be authoritarian, hierarchical, bureaucratic, and alienating. Perhaps, scholars are correct to point out that the purpose of the school was to discipline individuals (Blishen 1969; Foucault 1995) and that so far, it has not been possible to weed out this original intention, which became stigmatized as the educational ideals changed in the second half of the 20th century. Now, the aim of school is to assist individuals in their development, which occurs through the interactions of all participants—including students—in the educational processes (Vallance 1974).

The reasons for interest in ideas redirecting from teaching to learning remain topical; these are, for instance, rapid socio-economic change, the use of new communication technologies, rising unemployment among the youth, and changes in learning theories

(Marbeau 1976). Even more, they have increased their impact on everyday life. With the successive challenges (new technologies, COVID-19 pandemic, political changes, centralization of control over education), the sense of poor coping therewith reoccurs, whereas the reasons for this are often attributed to the widening deficits in individuals' competencies.

Postulates regarding the changes in education have remained the same for several decades now. We acknowledge and understand that the school as an institution, as well as the relationship between people therein and with its environment, can act as a barrier or a condition for life in a democracy. Further, they can hinder or support personal development or be an element of active participation in creating society and culture or the cause for lack thereof (Kwieciński 1993: X). However, the same questions are still being posed: Are school graduates prepared to live with other people? Does the received education encourage creative thinking? Why the competing ideologies of education do not gain ground, which could provide more opportunities for empowerment? Why do attempts to change the assumptions underlying current schooling fail? Why these assumptions are so powerful: are they only habits and the incapability of imagining practices that could construct a different world? The persistence of certain patterns and corresponding practices remains a puzzle.

These questions do not necessarily remain unanswered, although it seems that the issues they indicate are not explored in a systematical and interdisciplinary manner. Another important question remains whether it is possible to do so given the current disciplinary divisions and ways of financing large research projects that prevail in Poland as well as in other countries. Finally, how deeply do the changes advocated by alternative education affect the interests for which schools are maintained and which allow schools to be maintained in order to instil certain beliefs that do not violate their hegemony? The analyses conducted insofar provide partial answers to each of the questions posed. They indicate, among others, that social control has never been abandoned as a goal in schools. What has changed is its visibility, as it ceased to be an overt priority. The attitudes shaped by school correspond with capitalist employment: they reinforce social inequalities, sustain hierarchy in occupational positions, create patterns of identification with social class and gender, and promote types of personal development that correspond to relations of domination and subordination (Vallance 1974; Bowles, Gintis 1976). These findings appear to remain valid despite the decades that passed since their publication.

Democratization of Education

There are numerous terms in education that are ambiguous and based on contradicting ideas. The term 'democratization,' when referring to education, is usually restricted to schooling—though rarely to its informal aspects, such as home learning, extra-curricular activities, etc.—and to opposing authoritarianism in teacher-student relations, hence defining its semantic content. It is not so much about preparing an informed, active citizen in democratic political systems—that too, yet it is rather a side issue—as it is about treating children and parents as equal partners, for example, in making decisions and taking responsibility, and in actively participating in the creation of school.

It is indicated that in the so-called authoritarian approach, parents and children have little influence over what happens in school. Their participation is usually limited to the acceptance of the educational system's offer. Alternatively, parents provide base and support for organizational and custodial activities. Other relationships with school personnel or different attitudes toward educational ideology, including teacher-student interaction, are viewed as competitive and disrespectful. A parent and student become then the part of the problem rather than the solution. However, while maintaining the basic characteristics encoded by the concept of authoritarianism, teacher-student relationships can take many forms with varying degrees of dependency (autocratic, paternalistic, charismatic, organizational, expert, and consultative) (Meighan 1993: 217).

The concept of democratization is equally imprecise in this context. If applied to the same phenomena, then relationships between teachers and students could also assume different forms (procedural, representational, committee, direct); however, the relationships would contain more elements of independence and all participants would participate in decision-making on a fixed level. Further, it is also puzzling why school systems that oppose to their authoritarian counterparts are not described by means of negation. Although these terms are applied, we are aware that the authoritarian-democratic construct is the source of many difficulties. It does not illustrate that subordination/dominance may assume different forms and levels; it does not differentiate between individual and group independences. What is more, it does not indicate the elements that (in)dependence encompasses. There is no consideration for what lies between authoritarianism and democracy, which could indicate the possibilities of transition from one form to another. The fact that these terms can be applied to other elements of education and/or school life—regime, organization, teaching and its goals, etc.—creates even more confusion.

There are numerous elements that co-determine teachers' relationships with students, the organizational style of the school being one of them. Some styles are more capable of carrying a demand for compliance, following instructions without questioning them (Woods 1977; Millgram 1974; Reynolds 1976). Grading is another of such elements, in which emphasis is placed on the results of learning, learners are assessed, norms are invoked, and all that is done for the purpose of limitation. Since certificates are given great importance, the assessors are required to be authoritative; as some sociologists point out [cf. Tillmann 1996: 131, 139–141], the purpose of school is not so much to educate and develop as to 'sort' for employers and to determine life chances and opportunities. While there is no neutral assessment, as each defines what is education and affects what happens to people upon its ending, not every assessment has to be based on the power invested in the teacher's role (Meighan 1993: 22). Another element of the teacher-student relationship constitute the interpretive patterns of school personnel and the resulting expectations of students. Experiments by Lippitt and White (1958) indicate that students conform to a particular pattern (authoritarian or democratic) within a short period of time; expectations are identified within minutes, while the behaviors imposed by the pattern become habitual after a few classes. Educational ideologies also play key role: some of them assume students to be passive and have well developed grounds to legitimize it. Other ideologies do not treat students as clay but rely on confrontation and sanctions instead. Each assumes some form of authority on the part of the teacher, or its lack, as well as the lack of authority on the part of

the student. Finally, the spaces in which the didactic process is carried out can and, in fact, do impose an educational ideology and teaching methods, which in turn assume certain relationships (Meighan 1993: 45). The layout of classrooms may be based on coercion or participation, may impose decisions or foster choices. It shapes relationships and reinforces some of the elements of interaction so that it is easier to pursue any of the alternatives.

The use of the terms authoritarian and democratic represents a dichotomous approach. Two models of education are contrasted, while the valued one is indicated. This approach is quite commonly used to describe educational alternatives or alternative educational ideologies; however, it may be misleading since there are more diverse types of education than suggested. Ronald Meighan (1993: 242–246) describes democratic learning as one in which participants organize themselves into a team of learners, set their agenda, and direct its implementation by treating teachers as sources of knowledge and helpers. Learning is thus about collaboration, which means that skills related to decision-making and responsibility-sharing are acquired, and the motivation to learn is based on internal pressures, encouraging people to see the value contributed by others and use it in their learning. Terms other than democratic education are also used to describe changes, attitudes, and ideas aimed at students who take control of and responsibility for their learning. Moreover, it is important to remember that some consider democratization to be a cosmetic change that involves students working in a good atmosphere with a kind, but still authoritarian, teacher who grants them certain privileges (see Meighan 1993: 201). If this is how the term is understood, then to call Rogers's proposal a 'democratization' would be to misrepresent his main ideas concerning learning. Further, it should be pointed out that his findings operate at a specific conceptual level: group (classroom) interactions that have their own logic and certain autonomy.

Rogierian Essential Assumptions

Attempts to reform Western education have a well-established history. In the 20th century, democratic tendencies were becoming more and more widespread. In many countries, attempts were made to develop schools in which education was not based on the unquestionable authority of the teacher, supported by an institutionally imposed curriculum. Centers were established that were part of the Progressive Education movement (also known as the New Educational Movement).¹ Prominent figures who were part of this trend include Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Janusz Korczak, and Stefania Wilczyńska. The Rogierian approach is historically rooted in and aligned with the humanistic-existential stream. It is difficult to identify all the thinkers that influenced the development of Rogers's concepts. These include Otto Rank, William H. Kilpatrick (a leading interpreter of Dewey's

¹ These attempts have not ceased, although there does not seem to be as much intellectual ferment and as many efforts to create school centers as characterized the movements mentioned above. The main debate raged through the 1970s and 1980s. However, it began much earlier and has been resurfacing repeatedly. It is our impression that the issue of teachers' and students' social-emotional competence and learning from each other through their interactions calls for a renewed discussion concerning the numerous elements that constitute a school life. New research papers have also been published that shed light on some of the difficulties of the child-centered models in establishing a democratic learning environment (cf. Sriprakash 2010).

philosophy of education), John Dewey, Jessie Taft, Frederick Allen, Karen Horney, Stanley Standal (Thorne 1995), as well as Abraham Maslow and Rollo May (co-founders of the “third wave” in psychology).

The consequences of relying on misguided principles of learning and mutual interaction are dire; thus, it is worth investigating yet another proposition. The person-centered approach (PCA) is applied most commonly in psychotherapy; however, Rogers’s work reached far beyond the field of psychotherapy and impacted many areas of society. For instance, it coincided with and contributed to the “open education” movement (Kirschenbaum 2004: 121). Shifting attention to the field of education, one may encounter other terms used to refer to Rogers’s proposals, such as, i.a., the student-centered approach (SCA). This flexible use of terminology seems debatable since the underlying assumptions, despite contextual shifts, remain the same. Rogers emphasizes that the relational qualities extracted from his research play a crucial role in both psychotherapy and education. This important point is often misunderstood. A distinction is usually made between the activities of the psychotherapist and the teacher, although Rogers argued that the overarching task of both professions is the facilitation of significant learning, which fosters the process of developing a fully functional person (Rogers 1993; Thorne 1995).² In other words, student-centered teaching is based on psychotherapeutic principles (Rogers 1993: 273, 285, 287).

Caroline Heim (2012: 289–298) extracted five axioms from Rogers’s work that are relevant from an educational perspective: non-directivity, climate creation, facilitation, reflective listening, and positive attitude. These components are briefly discussed below.

Non-directivity means avoidance to impose the course of action, thus being free to explore what seems relevant in a given moment. Imposition often results in opposition, evokes resistance, creates internal tension, and prevents meaningful learning. Rogers’s approach to education, as an extension of his concept of psychotherapy, is also called non-directive. However, the use of this term in both contexts can be misleading due to the fact that absolute non-directiveness is not possible. Further, the major difference lies in the source of the directives: in a student-centered approach, self-direction is important, which means that students explore issues that interest them. Teachers should share their insights yet not impose their views on students (Dismukes et al. 2000). This attitude can foster students’ ability to make reasoned judgments and take appropriate actions. Consequently, the learning process is democratic, based on mutual listening, dialogue, diversity, and shared construction of meanings, while its outcomes are unpredictable (Clark 2010). This is why Rogers preferred to use the term “learning” instead of “teaching.” Learning places more responsibility on students, requires their active participation, and brings to the fore their motivations and genuine interests. The nature of the relationship between teacher and student is also important. Meaningful learning occurs when the relationship is based on trust, mutual understanding, and congruence.

² Rogers points out one key difference between learning in the school classroom and in the psychotherapist’s office. He states that, In therapy the resources for learning one’s self lie within. There is very little data which the therapist can supply which will be of help since the data to be dealt with exist within the person. In education this is not true. There are many resources of knowledge, of techniques, of theory, which constitute raw material for use (Rogers 1993: 288).

Non-directivity opposes any set curriculum, which is an example of imposed intervention as authorities typically use the curriculum for control. Thus, they determine the content, pace and rhythm of the whole process (cf. [Sriprakash 2010](#)). Self-directed learning stands in contrast to authoritative teaching, in which the teacher enters the learning process as a dictating expert. A playground, where an adult does not enter with any imposed plan, can serve as an example of non-directive experiential learning. Children generally enjoy being in such places; when an adult sits on a bench and watches them play, he or she is struck by the fact that they are seldom bored or sad. On the contrary, most of the time they are active, “doing something,” interacting socially, and effortlessly engaging in a variety of complex behaviors: they are very intensely learning.

Rogers often used the term ‘facilitation’ and expressed the view that a teacher should be a facilitator. In his approach, “(...) the teacher is not a director or a controller, but only a consultant, which is student-centered” ([Jingna 2012: 34](#)). The teacher’s main task is to provide an environment that is conducive to learning. Rogers viewed groups as entities capable of self-direction; when self-directed groups flourish, their creativity can be awakened. Rogers opposed models of group action based on the idea that the leader should exert control by setting specific goals and expecting specific outcomes. Instead, he introduced the figure of a facilitator who serves the group rather than leads it ([Heim 2012: 289–298](#)). A facilitator is not someone who “pours” knowledge into other person’s head, but someone who facilitates their learning. He or she does not hide behind the facade of their social role, but brings their true self, including its emotional components, into the relationship.

Perhaps one of the simplest ways to expose the crucial features of facilitation is to contrast it with an authoritarian style of teaching. In anti-democratic teaching, which may be an extension of the authoritarian personality or a characteristic of the educational institution, the focus is placed on at least three key dynamics: submission/dominance, aggression, and conventionalism ([Whitley 1999](#)). The more authoritarian a given teacher is, the more likely he or she will resist acceptance of another point of view that does not conform to his or her axioms, and will impose own views and force into submission toward himself or herself. Such a teacher is influenced by conventionalism, and his or her behavior is tainted by aggression (overt and covert). Thus, he or she may aggressively defend or impose what they perceive as valid dogma or “ultimate truth.” The authority of a small-group tutor often has an inhibiting effect on students’ responses, exacerbating their uncertainty and affecting their performance. Expert knowledge is a valuable resource itself; it may motivate and inspire students. However, a tutor should not use his or her knowledge and position to impose and dominate, to put oneself at the top of the hierarchy in order to manipulate ([Heim 2012: 294](#)).

Thus, the facilitation of meaningful learning is based on certain characteristics existing in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner; therefore, climate creation plays a key role in the indicated approach. Facilitators are supposed to be climate creators, hence their influence is crucial. A teacher has an opportunity to influence the climate in classroom, which is an important element of the students’ positive attitude towards the teacher and the learning process. It is difficult to pinpoint what plays the most important role in raising or lowering ‘relational temperature’ during a class meeting. We

all experience differences in ‘temperatures’ when interacting with specific individuals and groups. We may colloquially describe someone as cold or warm. People who are perceived as cold tend to build interpersonal distance. Some are not only authoritative but downright authoritarian, which means, i.a., that they tend to emphasize hierarchy, focus rigidly on rules and regulations, impose their own very rigid views, and be punitive toward anyone who differs from their opinions. Such judgmental, opinionated attitudes elicit defensive reactions and contribute to a decrease in the ‘temperature of relationships’ in the classroom. Therefore, it can be assumed that the ‘interpersonal temperature’ is correlated with the presence of PCA components, or its lack.

Rogers claimed that when he succeeded in transforming all members of the group, including himself, into a learning community, it allowed the individuals involved to follow directions dictated by their interests, which usually triggered inquiry, questions, exploration, engagement, and perception of everything as being in the process of change (Rogers 1969: 105). Facilitation leads to an increased sense of freedom in learning. It allows for constant regrouping, as well as disconnecting from the group to work independently. It works best when experiential learning takes place; it leads to educational liberation, a sense of inner freedom, and enhanced mutual trust and respect. In such a context, real people, both teachers and students, can pursue their authentic interests.

Another important Rogerian element is reflective listening. Rogers himself uses the term empathic or empathetic listening most often. It is a specific way of listening to another person or group, which requires searching for total meaning—not just content, but feelings and attitudes as well. In some cases, the content is less important than the underlying feelings. Empathetic listening calls for “feeling into the speaker,” grasping what he or she is communicating from his or her point of view. Sensitive, empathetic listening introduced into a group by a facilitator may lead to an increased mutual attentiveness of group members, resulting in a decreased tendency to argue, and may potentially result in a willingness to include other points of view. Carl Rogers and Richard Farson (2015) indicate that individuals who have been listened to in this specific, active, empathic way become more emotionally mature, less defensive, and more open about their experiences. They also tend to be more democratic in their interactions with others, which is particularly important regarding the purposes of this study.

However, active listening involves some risk: by listening to someone in an open, empathetic way, one risks changing themselves. It is dangerous to abandon, even temporarily, what we believe in and to start thinking in other people’s terms. It takes considerable inner security and courage to be able to risk one’s self in understanding another person (Rogers, Farson 2015). Nevertheless, such listening might be seen as a basic and inalienable requirement for democratized social functioning.

As the final component of PCA approach, Caroline Heim indicates positive attitude/positive regard, which is central to supportive, caring, growth-promoting, and learning-facilitating relationships. Positive attitude/positive regard means appreciating a person for who she or he is, regardless of their specific behavior in the given moment. Rogers emphasized that unconditional positive regard is an attitude based on avoidance of judgments and evaluations. It can be experienced by children having parents who offer this quality: such children have the opportunity to imbibe unconditional love and acceptance and then

give it to other people as adults. Being judgmental appears to be interconnected with conditional positive regard, meaning that one is judged and evaluated first and only then comes either acceptance or rejection.

In his book *On Becoming a Person* (1993), Rogers also listed five important tenets of PCA, which, however, do not fully overlap with the components chosen by Heim. The creator of the person-centered approach stated that in order to experience meaningful learning and become a fully functioning person, one should be provided with: internal and external congruence, unconditional positive attitude, and empathetic understanding. Nevertheless, Rogers specified that it is crucial not only to possess these qualities and be able to activate such mental states but also to communicate them effectively to others (1993: 282–284). Thus, the qualities discussed should be complemented by congruence and effective communication.

Transparency, realness, truthfulness, or authenticity are all the synonyms of congruence. As mentioned previously, there are two levels of congruence: internal and external. Rogers emphasizes the importance of congruence between the self and the experience. In some cases, the experiences that do not match the self and appear incompatible are denied; they are not allowed to become part of the self-awareness, resulting in a lack of synchrony that is called internal incongruence. The state of internal incongruence—the blockage between the self and the experience—precipitates external incongruence. Internally incongruent persons bring their incongruence into relationships with other people. Due to incongruence, a large amount of experience is excluded from intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. Thus, the interaction or relationship with an incongruent person is always inauthentic: others often perceive such individuals as lacking in authenticity, false or stiff. During such encounters, they may have a sense of being manipulated.

One last relevant issue should be underlined in this context: it is not enough to be internally congruent. The internal congruence has to be brought into interpersonal contact. Similarly, it is not enough to listen empathically: it is also necessary to bring the empathic understanding into the ‘here and now’ of the interaction and its accuracy has to be verified. There is often a risk of one assuming that she or he developed an accurate understanding of another person’s perspective; however, as it is communicated, vast discrepancies may be noted. Affective empathetic responses also need to be voiced and verified. Therefore, it is not enough to be capable of positive regard or even unconditional positive regard—another person needs to experience this quality during an interaction. The unconditional positive regard has to be visibly present and felt during an encounter as it may have a positive impact only when it is detected.

Rogerian Paradigm and Democratization of Education

In the Rogerian paradigm, the emphasis is placed on conceptualizing the qualities that characterize the learning environment. The ability to learn and develop as an individual is at the center and the learning process is based on the knowledge possessed by the students and shared by the means of a dialogue. Learning is a collective activity—a collaborative endeavor—which also depends on the ability to organize the learning situation. If not

suppressed, intellectual curiosity is a natural feature of human consciousness. Thus, the role of a teacher is to facilitate, organize the learning environment and situation, and accompany learners in the process of individual discovery and personal decision-making. The purpose of learning is to make one's own syntheses, find new points of view and new knowledge, as well as develop independence, self-respect, and responsibility. It seems to be democratic both in the sense of equal positions of a teacher and a learner, of mutual control over the process and not over the person, and of expansionist education for all.

It may be claimed that Rogers proposed something of a Trojan horse for the existing education. The Trojan horse is in the form of interpersonal relations, to which he attributed great importance. It is primarily the change of interpersonal relations—not only between teachers and students but throughout the whole school in its broadest sense—that was supposed to overcome the old school, which tormented students and forced teachers into dominating roles. They were supposed to incorporate innovation within the existing system and its goals. Such an approach cannot be refuted if one does not think of teaching and learning as activities that are fully controlled, but as interactions between individuals that are the 'product' of interactions with the world around them—largely composed of other people, but also objects and problems, including those studied and taught—that change everyone involved. The different shaping of interactions should begin with teachers, who are expected to be facilitators using several meaningful qualities in their interactions with students as well as with each other and other staff.

Rogers's proposal also possesses a gendered dimension. At first glance, it is completely absent, yet the focus on the person does not permit the privileging of any of his or her attributes, and requires an exercise in de-routinization, urging the search for equal practices. Some of the changes introduced by this psychologist may seem small when considered in isolation; however, a sociological treatment of these issues highlights an important, albeit trivial, finding. Individual elements, without seeing them in a pattern of interactions, may seem trivial and insignificant, but it is the cumulative effect of such a pattern that matters, determining a particular trend.

The societies are both enriched and challenged by democratic arrangements. Permitted diversity is potentially a significant strength. On the one hand, pluralism may generate multiple perspectives and fuel creativity; on the other hand, it leads to frictions and conflicts (Gutmann, Ben-Porath 2015). As it provides space for relatively free growth and actions, some individuals and groups may abuse this opportunity and turn it into visibly violent or camouflaged overpowering of others. Despite such real dangers, if democratic societies are to survive, educational systems seem to inevitably play a relevant role in that. Pro-democratic education is supposed to prevent visibly potent tendencies such as social disengagement, lack of political knowledge and preference to be politically uninformed (Gutmann, Ben-Porath 2015). The education system can instill respect for freedom in the younger generations as well as the need to listen to each other, to understand and tolerate each other. Democratic education is to equip students with such skills as the ability to engage in a non-threatening dialog based on interpersonal sensitivity. It should orient individuals to the present and future rather than the past, give them the tools for independent, critical learning in a changing world, and not separate professional preparation, personal satisfaction, and personal development, which seems even more

indispensable today than it did when the demands for deep school reform were first called for.

Pupils leaving such an environment could be expected to co-exist with others in a way that allows all participants to function as freely as possible, including expressing diverse thoughts and feelings without hindrance. However, these expressive individuals and groups need to take into consideration certain limitations. The key issue is empathic sensitivity, which serves as a protection against disrespectful, manipulative and damaging actions. In other words, from primary schools to universities, pro-democratic education should support the acquisition of skills useful at least three levels of social participation.

The first one could be named 'face-to-face,' i.e., the interpersonal or micro level. One of the core issues present at this level is power balancing: it is often difficult to practice the ability to give up on domination and control. Some individuals are not capable of 'taking a ride on the back seat'; they are power-driven and cannot resist the desire to 'pull the strings.' Pro-democratic educational training is about responsible power-sharing. As underlined earlier, the facilitator's key skill is the ability to 'step back' and allow the group to take the lead and direct itself. Pupils should be presented with an opportunity to develop their own arrangements. It creates an occasion for them to be fully engaged, also on the emotional level. Consequently, emotional engagement brings an opportunity to monitor and manage cognitions and affect in a synchronised manner. Social and emotional learning may occur and progress may be noticed.

The second skill set refers to the ability of interacting on the meso and macro levels, which is necessary for contacts with various institutions. The key aspects are the ability to influence institutions and the aptitude for protection against institutional domination. Some institutions tend to crush individual enterprises; the pro-democratic educational system aims to create an opportunity for an individual to be self-confident and assertive enough to counter-balance the institutional tendency to overpower and stifle a vulnerable person. The learning of democracy cannot have only declarative and ceremonial nature (Skidmore, Bound 2008: 9).

To conclude, pro-democratic education that applies the Rogerian concepts can be useful in acquiring skills applicable on all levels: micro, meso, and macro. The presence of self-awareness and congruence enables self-actualisation and a sense of satisfaction. A satisfied, congruent individual who is also empathic and provides positive regard in relationships with others appears to be nearly an icon of democratic citizenship.³

Postidium

Rogers's findings are supported by research. For many years, he verified the achieved results in a variety of areas ranging from psychotherapy to group process facilitation, conflict resolution, and education (Rogers, Stevens 1971). The effectiveness of psychotherapeutic

³ Finland seems to be one of the countries where the constructive introduction of educational reform took place. The paramount postulates of educational reform were worked out during cross-party consultations. Not only experts and scientists but also teachers, school principals, parents, and pupils all participated in the discussion. The implementation of the reform took seven years (Sadura 2017).

principals in educational contexts was also confirmed by extensive studies performed by The National Consortium for Humanizing Education. The research work was conducted in forty-two of the fifty American states and eight other countries (e.g., Germany). These are the largest field studies devoted to the effectiveness of educational activities that have been conducted insofar. They provide evidence showing that it is possible to have an educational activity that leads to both high educational achievements and social-emotional development (Rogers, Lyon, Tausch 2014: 113). Studies performed in other countries have produced similar results; they are collected and described in the book *On becoming an effective teacher* (Rogers et al. 2014). The authors cite researchers such as John Hattie, Jeffrey Cornelius-White, David Aspy, Cheryl Blalock Aspy, Flora Roebuck, Anne-Marie Tausch and Reinhard Tausch. For instance, Aspy and Roebuck recorded and analyzed three thousand seven hundred hours of lessons in over five hundred schools in various parts of the United States with teachers and children from diverse ethnic groups, while Tausch and Tausch conducted an extensive research in Germany.

These researchers offered evidence that students made greater academic progress when teachers were able to create instructions based on empathy, i.e., teachers sought to understand what personal meanings students attributed to school experiences, positivity, i.e., teachers showed students respect as individuals, and congruence. They improved their problem-solving skills, showed increased interest, displayed positive attitudes about themselves (including self-confidence), and initiated more classroom activities and conversations. Difficulties in maintaining discipline during classes were less frequent, skipping class was less common, and students showed more positive attitudes toward school (Rogers 2002). On the other hand, some of the research findings revealed that class size, use of audio-visual equipment, and increased funding, which are often taken as the indicators of educational modernity, appear to have little impact on student achievements. What matters most are effective and interactive relationships between person-centered teachers and students (Rogers et al. 2014: 38). Research also indicated the presence of a specific characteristic of so-called *transformational teachers*—i.e., teachers who have a high impact on their students' achievement—called grit. In an educational context, grit means: “perseverance and passion for long term goals. (...) Grit is about: unwavering trust in students' ability to learn when given a flexible, caring, but firm environment” (Rogers et al. 2014: 41–42).

Despite the scientifically proven effectiveness of the approach presented in this article, it remains a peripheral phenomenon in Western educational institutions. In Germany, for example, it is estimated that teachers who bring warmth, respect, non-directive facilitative activities, empathic understanding, and genuineness into classroom interactions make up between 11 to 14% of the professional group; some consider this estimation to be inflated.

In Poland, schools promoting democratic thinking and behaving are usually privately-owned, meaning they are not accessible to everyone. Such schools are not common or well established; quite the opposite, they are unique, alternative, and reminiscent of island outposts. Additionally, democratic in-school functioning does not guarantee that graduates will have an opportunity to transplant this style into the public sphere. Education in exclusive, non-autocratic institutions may result in maladaptation after a clash with out-school reality (Kwieciński 2012).

As indicated by Alberto Zucconi, one of the main barriers in the implementation of the person-centered and pro-democratic educational style are power issues. Unfortunately, educational institutions are often allowing ‘power-thirsty’ people to ‘play their game.’ The presence of individuals focused mainly on climbing as high as possible in the hierarchical structure and filled with the ‘hunger for control’ introduces tension and relational toxicity. There are no successful measures in shielding against such individuals so far. They are often elected for superior positions and have the power to manipulate others into their power games. Their personality profiles often have an authoritarian peak, supported by the narcissistic trait, or the other way around; a person characterised by such a personality type is unlikely to provide qualities key to the Person-Centered Approach.

Perhaps these findings are ignored because attempts to implement pupil centered-approach in education are not easy. Resistance to change can be strong both outside and inside educational institutions. Rogers himself asked very similar questions to those raised in the introduction herein after he tried to work in this style at the University of Chicago and encountered strong resistance or even hostility. For example, students expressed opinions that, since they were paying for college, they expected experts to teach them on the basis of selected material. According to Rogers, their approach was caused by, among others, years of dependency experienced in the schools they attended (2002: 315). When students had been forced to fit into a rigorous convention for years, the exposure to sudden freedom of choice caused unpleasant tension. Paradoxically, many students who demand freedom completely fail to cope with the situation in which it is given to them. One reason for such a state of affairs is that they lack the skills necessary to take responsibility for their own decisions. Non-directive learning brings uncertainty, unpredictability, dilemmas, moments of disappointment, confusion, and insecurity.

The change in functioning style is equally difficult—if not more—for teachers, who have been stuck in traditional education longer than their students. Subordination, following the path of top-down programs and systemic requirements, has had an even greater impact on them, whereas the person-centered approach makes the teacher shed his or her expert status and become a ‘mere’ member of a democratic learning community. The teacher stops supervising and punishing, which may have been a source of a sense of power. Moving away from the curriculum requires extra work on the part of a teacher because there will continuously be new topics to learn about. If a teacher conducts lessons in several classes, or if a lecturer conducts courses with several groups, and they encourage free exploration of a variety of issues that fall within the scope of a specific subject or discipline, the multidirectional nature of the search and the diversity of the studied content forces a constant broadening of their horizons, permanent learning. Such a process is time- and energy-consuming. Simultaneously, it is a participation in an unpredictable, uncertain ‘expedition into the unknown.’ Such an expedition always ruthlessly proves how limited individual knowledge is, undermining the sense of being an expert. Further, the student-centered way of working can easily lead to difficulties in cooperating with other teachers. There is a risk of stigmatization, exclusion, or mobbing.

The implementation of this approach requires a change in the attitudes of both school personnel and parents. The notion of a “bad” child would need to cease to exist, corresponding to the key Rogerian assumption that people are good by nature. They can

become “bad” in cases of relational deprivation, toxicity, and trauma. Further, it would be necessary to stop exerting ruthless pressures on children, as well as impositions and desires to direct them into pre-planned paths of knowledge and development; a non-directive style of parenting would require that. Children would stay with adults and peers and participate in various activities, but would not be forced to act against their will and intrinsic motivation, except when it is necessary for the sake of others or the child’s safety. Parents would respect the children, not overpower or coerce them; however, they would also set rules for the children to follow as some structure and basic limits are necessary. Negotiating rules without the use of force is a very difficult task, for some impossible to undertake. Children raised and educated in this way would probably be able to take responsibility for themselves very early on, without adults having to overly control and protect them, which is so common in Western societies. In other words, the changes would have to be profound and aimed toward establishing a society free of arrogant persuasion, manipulative pressure, and ruthless competition, in which all members could be guided by their own judgments and choices tolerated by others.

This analysis is very critical of Western education. It sees it as a distortion of the natural process based on spontaneous learning as all the authorities tell pupils that their exploratory nature is worthless. If one is not taught, it is not learning. The attention is drawn to the pervasive arbitrary imposition by authority-knowledge in Western education. Proposals for humanistic education, on the other hand, put this traditional education ‘on its head.’ Unsurprisingly, they also pose a threat to educational policymakers who sometimes want to maintain precise control over education, closely tied to the politics. Bottom-up, free exploration and discussion, partnership, tolerance of difference—these are not the trends they desire. Rogers perceived himself as a quiet revolutionary. It seems reasonable as his attempts at democratization continue to clash with autocratic or even authoritarian opposition.

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