COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN LITHUANIAN SCHOOLS: THE VIEWS OF PUPILS, THEIR PARENTS AND EXTERNAL EVALUATORS

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Abstract

Human relations at school create favourable micro-climate for learning, encourage positive behaviour, motivation, and help to create appropriate conditions for mature personality development. Acknowledging that good relations have a positive effect on personality development, the views of pupils, their parents and external evaluators of school quality assurance agencies was analysed, the current situation of relations at school was observed, trends important to all members of the school community were highlighted and education problems were discussed.

The external evaluations show that very good learning outcomes, academic achievements and knowledge of pupils are considered to be very important, while the teaching of moral values and humane relationships are considered less important. Practical and interpersonal relations prevail in schools, whereas personality improvement, ability to reflect and empathise with others, unconditionally rely on the phenomenon of conscience is only an aspiration.

Key words: *relations at school, ethical values, school, lesson*

1. INTRODUCTION

A school, as an education institution, helps to reveal and realize potential mental, physical and moral strengths of an individual. This revelation occurs through existential values – the beauty, goodness and truth. Relations based on these values demonstrate the person's maturity manifesting in different walks of life, embody the function of spiritual core to express and create the oneness and wholeness of a human being (Frankl 2009). Such search for meaning may help to refine and organize complex ethical phenomena because the absence of ethical goal leads to meaninglessness and fragmentation, and, according to T. Mclaughlin (1997, p. 20), "education that is not based on values is not only impossible and undesirable, but also illogical". Therefore, an important parameter of education quality is human relations that, expressed as moral values, become a constituent part of all competences and enable an individual to become a personality.

Curriculum in Lithuanian schools is designed so that every pupil would become a personality according to his/her needs and resources, would be prepared for active participation in the modern society, would build generic and subject-specific competences and develop moral values. Moral values are highlighted in Lithuania's Progress Strategy Lithuania 2030, which states that the biggest strength is confidence in man and concentration of creative powers. The values important for Lithuania's progress are: the responsibility of society's members for own actions, morality, and active care not only for oneself but also for the environment, community and the country.

Values are always emphasized. Nevertheless, devaluation of values is observed both in the society and in specific schools. Talking about the factors that have an effect on moral development of individual members of the society scholars disclose "the paradox of progress" and draw attention to the fact that along with the improving material well-being and fast modernization relations between people become weaker, values go to the background, the ethical criterion of relations (with other people, self and environment) is eliminated. Stagnation or chaos is observed in education process too, ethical contradictions occur between the possibilities of value education and treating people as goods in the

market (Drucker 2009; Duoblienė 2012; Edvards & Usher 2000; Hargreaves 1999, 2008; Lukošienė 2007; Miniotaitė 2013). Obviously, moral factors have a much higher effect than material factors on the quality of education (Aramavičiūtė 2005; Frankl 2009, 2010; Lukšienė 2000 et al.). Human relations create the necessary environment for personality development and at the same time assure better quality of education and influence organizational success and progress (Aramavičiūtė 2005; Barkauskaitė & Žadeikaitė 2006; Bitinas 2000; Haskins 2000; Martišauskienė 2006, 2008).

Different practices of assuring school progress, the quality of education process and the entire education system exist in the world. The overview of education quality assurance reports from European countries has revealed that the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of school performance are most often described by educational factors: microclimate, communication and collaboration, school culture etc. In direct evaluation of school performance quality these factors are not always evaluated; however they are important contextual factors used for the interpretation of school performance data.

According to the data of the European Education Information Network *Eurydice*, performance monitoring and evaluation, recommendations for performance improvement are the factors contributing to performance quality. In many European countries the level of education quality is determined by means of external evaluation and internal self-evaluation. The external evaluation of school performance is included into strategic programmes and is important for the making of education quality improvement policies of European states (Whitby 2010; Penzer 2011). Lithuania also has education quality improvement system in place – the external evaluation of general education schools' performance (hereinafter external evaluation).

Education quality assurance system is important for the achievement of the goals of European member states as provided in European Growth Strategy Europe 2020. Lithuania's Progress Strategy Lithuania 2030 envisages the strengthening of the society's abilities that would facilitate the response to the global economic and environment changes, assure sustainable development of the country. The strategy emphasizes that the quality of life in the future Lithuania and successful implementation of tasks will depend on the values prevailing in the society, competent and creative people.

In the light of changing economic, social and political conditions, faster globalization and development of information and communication technologies, ethical relations at school become a very *actual problem*. The article raises the following issues: what relations between the school community members are observed by the external evaluators of school performance quality (hereinafter the evaluators) and what are the views of pupils and their parents about the relations at school?

1.2 Goal

Determine the trends of relations at school observed in external evaluation.

1.3. Objectives

Disclose the most notable features of educational relations at school and expose the realization of relations in the lesson (from the evaluators, pupils and parents point of view).

1.4. Theoretical approach of the study *is based on*:

- *The concept of holistic education* (Bitinas 2000; Lukšienė 2000): a child develops as an integral and indivisible personality, and the education and learning process is a uniform system;
- *The fundamental notions of humanistic paradigms of education* (Lepeškienė 1996; Barkauskaitė 2001) are respect for the individual, promotion of goodness, democracy, justice and equality, mutual aid;
- *The theory of social constructionism* (Berger & Luckmann 1991; Helmke 2012) is based on the presumption that the activities and knowledge in the learning process are not only constructed basing and reflecting on the experience, but are also discovered, developed through active

engagement, communication, collaboration, and authentic experiences; learning is always exposed to certain social, economic, cultural and educational context conditions;

- *Teaching process evaluation models* (Guba & Lincoln 1989). External evaluation is *responsive constructive formative evaluation*.

1.5. Study sample

The article analyses and discusses the data on the quality of performance of 113 schools accumulated by the National Agency for School Evaluation in academic year 2012 in 41 (68 %) municipalities. The distribution of schools by locality: 40 schools in cities, 28 schools in towns, and 45 schools in small towns and villages. The distribution of schools by types: 34 gymnasiums (13.2 % of the total number of gymnasiums in the country), 18 secondary schools (7.3 % of the total number of secondary schools in the country), 43 lower secondary schools (9.2 % of the total number of lower secondary schools in the country), 6 pre-gymnasiums (9 % of the total number of pre-gymnasiums in the country) and 12 primary schools (6.9 % of the total number of primary schools in the country). The article discusses quantitative data and qualitative (text) information of 10334 lessons of different subjects observed in these schools, 113 external evaluation reports and statistical data of interviews with pupils of 113 schools and their parents (14734 pupils[1] and 18940 parents were interviewed).

1.6. Research methods

Theoretical – comparative analysis of literature and documents, interpretation, generalization, evaluation.

Analysis of empirical studies – the data are grouped by doing a *mixed quantitative and qualitative content analysis*. The content of recorded information is classified according to preselected analysis units. Such units are indicators of the school's quality of performance (according to external evaluation procedure[2]) and evaluation indicators – symbols, words, groups of words, sentences and paragraphs (texts of external evaluation reports). It should be noted that out of 67 school performance evaluation indicators 6 (9 %) indicators, which reflect the development of relations at school, were selected for the analysis. The empirical analysis was based on the answers (assessments) of pupils and their parents and observation materials of the evaluators, the subjectivity factor of which was eliminated by the big sample and triangulation. The data were collected by external evaluators, who were trained in a 125-hour course (80 hours of theory and 45 hours of praxis), successfully finished the course, had a period of practical work, were accredited and licensed to conduct external evaluations.

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING VALUES IN THE CONTEXT OF PEDAGOGICAL RELATIONS

Relations are based on the recognition of individual's worth and respect, personal freedom and responsibility in communication. Relations at school involve formal and non-formal school life. They are the methodological foundation of education and a guarantee of success. Human relations, their quality, the level of positivity form the human character and influence mental and spiritual development. It is not easy to establish the fruitful relationship with a pupil: it is important to know the child and recognise the integrity of the body, mind and spirit. The key principles of pedagogy must be followed while developing and nurturing the appropriate ethical relations.

6 indictors (*values, norms of behaviour, principles; community relations; microclimate in classes; personality development expectations; encouraging desirable behaviour; teacher attitudes and teaching methods*) out of 67 performance indicators were selected for the analysis of school relations. External evaluation reports revealed both success and failure cases in the relations of teacher

[1] Pupils of primary schools were not interviewed.
[2] On the approval of the Procedure for the External Audit to Evaluate the Quality of Performance in General Education Schools, http://www.nmva.smm.lt/isorinis-vertinimas/dokumentai/

communities. Teacher communities are good at regulating activities (development of various sets of rules governing the behaviour of community members), discussing and theoretically describing the envisaged outcomes (plan and discuss the expectations of the pupil's personality development, methods of encouraging the desirable behaviour), however in the teaching practice the agreements and theoretical education models are implemented on the average level (level 2 compared to the maximum level 4).

The analysis of the most common strengths and weaknesses reported by the external evaluators revealed that out of the six aforementioned indicators *community relations* and *microclimate in classes* are most often listed in the strengths column. Such findings were seen in the external evaluation reports of almost half of the schools (Table 1).

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses indicated in schools (N=113) external evaluation reports

Indicator	Strength (%)	Weakness (%)
Values, norms of behaviour, principles	16,8	0
Community relations	46,9	0
Microclimate in classes	44,2	0
Personal development expectations	5,3	0,9
Encouraging desirable behaviour	15,0	0,9
Teacher attitudes and teaching methods	8,0	48,7

It should be noted that *teacher attitudes*, as well as *personality development expectations* are difficult to standardize, measure and express by quantitative data. The data show that for schools it is not difficult to improve specific activities, the conclusions about which are made from behaviour and communication observations; however schools find it difficult to influence personal attitudes. This might be the reason why the causes of education, communication and collaboration problems are seldom analysed in schools.

External evaluation data confirm L. Duoblienė's (2012, p. 19) insight that the modern "school culture is standardized by using various structural elements and their unification, calculation and classification. Such an approach provokes conflicts and creates dissatisfaction of different interest groups with the environment for self-expression and the school culture". In summary we may claim that identification of evaluation criteria and selection of adequate evaluation methods are very important for the observation of school community relations. Without adequate criteria and methods the self-evaluation of schools lacks consistency, clarity and depth. For instance, in the analysis of relations trends, the evaluators consider the background of the specific school and discuss the collected data with school administration and teachers in order to reduce as much as possible subjective interpretations and to understand the causal relationship, which is sometimes hard to disclose empirically.

Evaluation reports show that *community relations* and *microclimate in classes* is best revealed in after-class activities (events, celebrations, excursions, collaboration with school stakeholders etc.) and non-formal education. Formal education is more focused on knowledge transfer than on meeting the goals of personality development and education. Nevertheless, external evaluation reports also contain examples of successful formal education activities: efficient methodological performance of teachers, effective shared leadership, which directly affects the education and learning of values by children, has been observed in some schools (up to 50 % of schools evaluated every year). Some schools (50 to 75 % of schools evaluated every year) have demonstrated the awareness of the essence of education by giving importance to activities that create open and human relations for the sake of better learning and personality development. The necessity to maintain the unity and balance of three natural powers –

physical, mental and spiritual – was already noted in classical pedagogy. If this unity and balance is disturbed, the education becomes one-sided, unnatural and even contradicting to the child's nature.

Data analysis show that although every school plans its activities, the planning is moderate in quality (level 2) (the planning was named as a strength and was rated as good or very good in 4.4 % of evaluated schools, whereas in 12.4 % of schools the planning was recommended to be improved and was rated as poor). Besides, the planning of activities does not have a significant effect on the relations of school community, collective actions, school progress and better teaching and learning. This can be explained by several reasons: the self-evaluation of school performance, the planning and actual activities are not integrated, different activities are formally joined together, the greatest attention is given to the learning of specific subjects, and too little attention is paid to the value system.

The analysis of *desirable behaviour encouraging* practices and *teacher attitudes and teaching methods* focused on the underlying norms of school community relations and reflection of the norms in the education process and the microclimate of separate classes, on the relation between expectations and educational effect, and the influence of the said factors on the pupil's personality development. Data analysis revealed that all schools have rewarding and disciplinary systems in place and have discussed methods for positive reinforcement of desirable behaviour. The analysis of external evaluation reports and student opinion survey results revealed that regardless of the awareness of the subject matter of the agreement the school community members do not always abide with them (for instance, according to the interviewed pupils, 16.8 % of teachers are late for classes). It should be noted that school rules contain detailed information on prohibitions, whereas rewards are scantly described; therefore praise for good behaviour and human relations between community members does not counterweight disciplinary actions for undesirable behaviour. According to Stephen R. Covey (2007), "rules disempower independent thinking of people; they prevent the fostering of innovations and resourcefulness and create the medium for cajoling. Without a high level of trust <...> quality is impossible to reach" (p. 294). Data analysis showed that school regulations do not always encourage responsibility. Education potential is strengthened when the building of skills is consistently based on positive and emphatic communication, learning of self-control, active engagement and creation. Therefore, the analysis of the data suggests that human relations (self-inquiry and understanding others, self-perception as a subject, seeing oneself through the eyes of others) at schools is yet an aspiration.

3. TEACHING AND LEARNING VALUES IN THE LESSON: EVALUATORS' VIEWPOINT

By observing and evaluating the aspect of relations in the lesson, the evaluators analyse the communication between teachers and pupils in the activity basing on the following criteria: *relations between pupils* (satisfaction with classmates, mutual help, willingness and ability to collaborate), *teacher's performance* (ability to clearly explain the contents of the lesson, caring of pupils, supporting them, satisfaction of pupils with the lesson), *teacher-pupil interaction* (discipline and order in the classroom, class management, clear requirements, objective and adequate assessment, communication style, harmony in the teacher's verbal and non-verbal language), *pupils' attitude towards the teacher* (active / inactive participation in the lesson, respectful / disrespectful, or even impudent behaviour). For the evaluation of relations a certain level was attributed to the above-listed criteria in the observation of pupils' and teacher performance in the lesson. During the observation by evaluators, the *relations* between pupils, the teacher and the pupils in the lesson are usually good (Figure 1 illustrates the data of 2012).

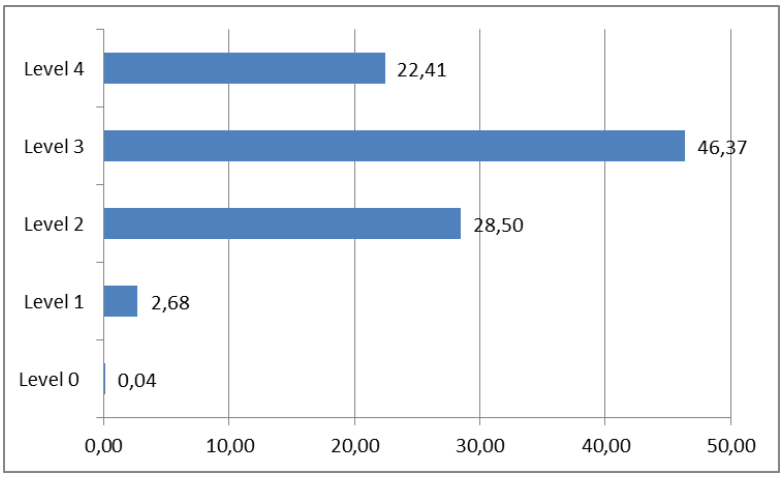

Fig. 1 – Evaluation of relations in lessons (%) observed during external evaluation (N=10334)

In the majority of lessons (68.78 % or 7108 observed lessons) the relations were of levels 4 and 3. The evaluators found that the situation must be improved (levels 1 and N) only in 2.72 % of observed lessons (i.e. 310 lessons or in average in 3 lessons in each school). The summarized data of external evaluation report showed that relations in the lesson are ruined in one-fourth of the lessons, most often in the assessment of learning achievements: the assessment of learning progress and achievements receives the lowest evaluation rates (the average level is – 2.4), every second school is recommended to improve the monitoring of knowledge acquisition (50 % schools), assessment for learning (48 %); every fourth school is recommended to improve the assessment for knowing (24 %). Assessment is very important as it is related to personal dignity; therefore the assessment can encourage but also can inhibit personality development. Research findings and empirical data of external evaluations show that teachers lack specific knowledge and therefore find it difficult to recognize and educate gifted pupils and pupils with special learning needs. Thus teachers focus on pupils with average abilities, ordinary creativity and needs. Such inadequate teaching reality has a negative effect on relations.

School context (social, economic, cultural, teaching environment) also has an effect on relations. The data collected by evaluators in 2012 (10334 observed lessons) were compared by groups of grades, school type, school location and social-economic background of the school (the selected criterion was the number of pupils receiving free meals) (Figures 2–5).

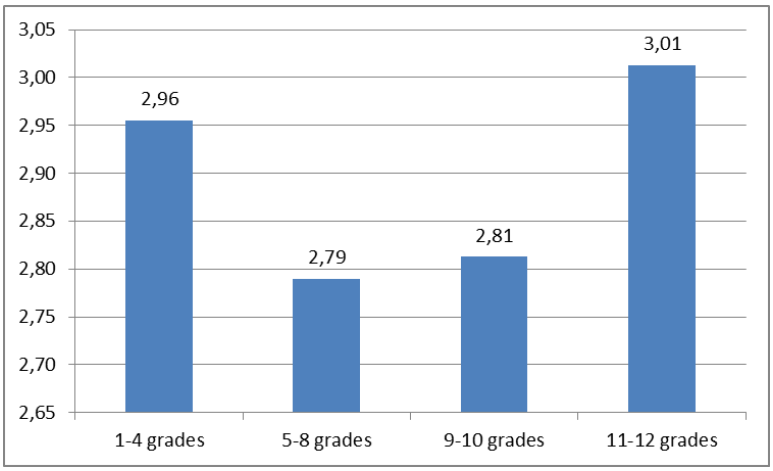

Fig. 2 – Evaluation of relations in the lesson by groups of grades (level average)

The highest rating level was given to relations in lessons of 11-12th grades, the lower quality of relations was observed in lessons of 9-10th grades and the lowest rating level was given to relations in lessons of 5-8th grades (Fig. 2). Relations in the lessons of pre-gymnasiums and primary schools were of relatively high level (Fig. 3), whereas the relations in lower secondary schools scored the lowest.

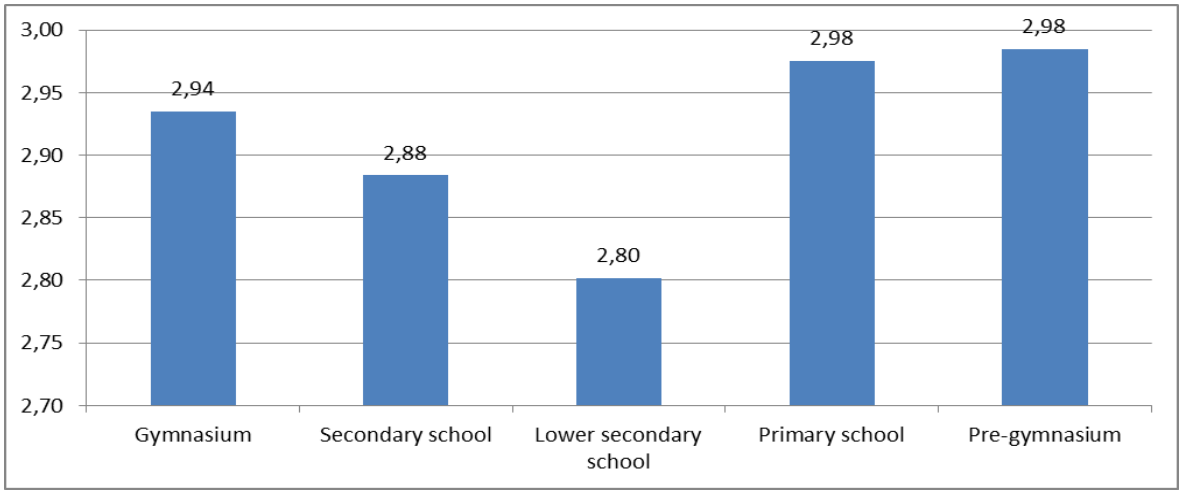

Fig. 3 – Evaluation of relations in the lesson by types of schools (level average)

Relations in city schools (Fig. 4) were rated higher compared to relations in small town and village schools. Relations in lessons in schools of poor social-economic background were better in classes with fewer students receiving free meals (up to 24 %) (Fig. 5). Lower quality relations in lessons were observed in schools with a higher number of pupils (more than 75 %) receiving free meals.

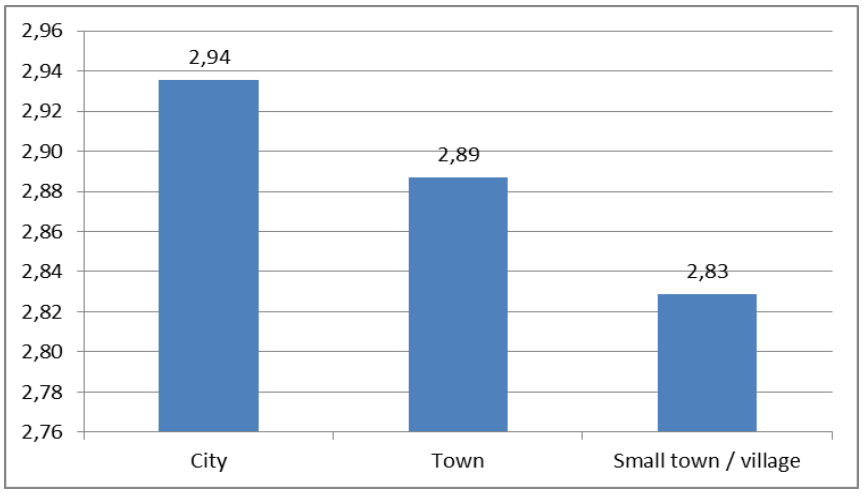

Fig. 4 – Evaluation of relations in the lesson by school location (level average)

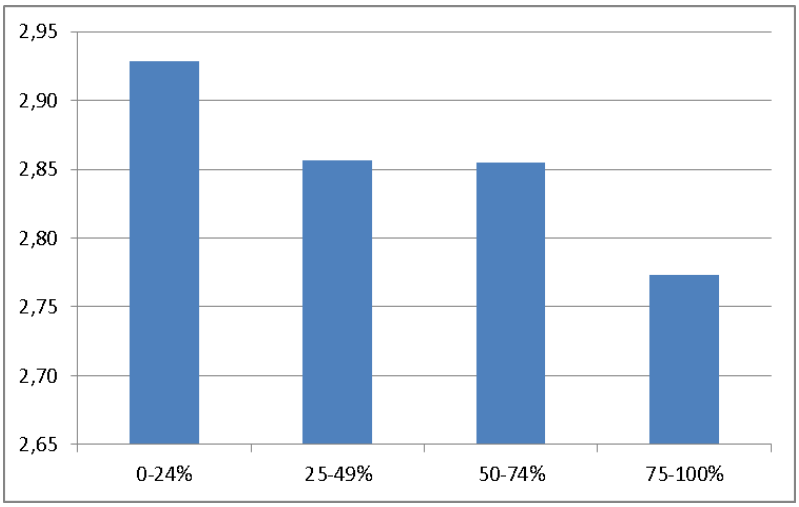

Fig. 5 – Evaluation of relations in the lesson by the number of children who receive free meals at school (level average)

The summary of data revealed that higher numbers of pupils receiving free meals was observed in the schools of small towns and villages and the majority of lower secondary schools are located in small towns and villages too. The analysis of teacher qualification categories in small town and village schools showed that most often such schools employ senior teachers (48 %), teachers-methodologists (25 %) and teachers (20 %). About 3 % of teachers in small town and village schools did not hold any qualification category (due to short work experience, lack of appropriate education or other reasons). The majority of teachers in city and town schools are teachers-methodologists and senior teachers and only 0.8 to 1.5 % of teachers do not hold qualification category. Sociologists acknowledge that the type of relations depend on individual's self-determination based on perceived motives, beliefs, values and attitudes; therefore the context should not have a significant effect on relations. However, the discussed empirical data show that in our case the context has a significant effect.

5. PUPILS' AND PARENTS' VIEWS OF THE RELATIONS IN LESSONS AND AT SCHOOL

Pupils' opinion survey revealed the problems of relations during lessons. According to pupils, there are cases of disrespectful behaviour both from pupils and from teachers side (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of views of 5-12th grade pupils interviewed in 2009–2013 (N=44863)

Questionnaire statements	Percentage of answers supporting the statement
Some pupils in our class are disrespectful and impudent with teachers	57.2
Teachers give more attention to pupils who learn well and less attention to pupils who have difficulties	34.6
Sometimes teachers insult me, mock at me	26.5
Teachers are late to classes	16.8

More than half of interviewed pupils (57.2 %) were positive about the statement *'Some pupils in our class are disrespectful and impudent with teachers'*, less than half of the pupils (26.5 %) supported the statement *'Sometimes teachers insult me, mock at me'*. The data also revealed dissimilar approach of

teachers to students with different abilities: almost one-third (34.6 %) of pupils supported the statement *'Teachers give more attention to pupils who learn well and less attention to pupils who have difficulties'*. The interviewed pupils were asked if teachers were late to classes. Almost every sixth pupil (16.8 %) supported the statement *'Teachers are late to classes'*. External evaluation reports also reported cases when pupils were late to classes.

The analysis of external evaluation reports revealed that negative views (attitudes) of pupils towards the teacher's performance could be influenced by the style of teacher-pupil interaction. In most of observed lessons (more than 75 %) a strict style of instruction prevailed (strict discipline and order in the lesson, teacher-centred approach prevailed, for some pupils the tempo of the lesson was too fast, the needs, learning style and abilities of some pupils were disregarded). Insufficient evaluation of pupils' performance and progress in the lesson was observed (evaluation information was delivered hastily, the activities of the lesson and the overall learning of the class was evaluated by the teacher and no time was left for the reflection of the pupils).

The comparison of pupils' and parents' views (Tables 3 and 4) showed that pupils and parents have different opinions about the situation at school: for instance, the majority of parents interviewed for the survey in 2012 supported the statement '*We are satisfied with the discipline and order during lessons'*, whereas the pupils held the opinion that there should be more order at school (especially in 5-8th grades group) and very similar percentages of support to the statements were received every year. It should be noted that parents of primary education classes were mostly satisfied with the discipline and order at school. The quality of education in the lesson was also rated the highest in primary schools (and primary classes in other types of schools.

Table 3: Distribution of parents' (N=18941) opinions by grade groups

Percentage of answers agreeing with the statement / Questionnaire statements	Grades 1-4	Grades 5-8	Grades 9-12
I am sure that my child is safe at school: nobody will harm or humiliate him/her	79.9	73.6	82.0
We are satisfied with the discipline and order during lessons	96.1	84.4	88.2

The survey data showed that in the opinion of almost half of the pupils in grades 5 – 8 (55.7 %) the lessons are too noisy, one-third (317 %) of the pupils support the statement that high achievers are mocked at. In senior classes the percentage of support to these statements is lower; however the trends remain the same (Table 4).

Table 4: Distribution of pupils' (N=14734) opinions by grade groups

Percentage of answers agreeing with the statement / Questionnaire statements	Grades 5-8	Grades 9-10	Grades 11-12
If I were the director of the school, I would seek there were more order at school	76,4	65,5	58,4
Classmates mock at those who attempt to learn well	31,7	23,7	15,6
Sometimes there is such a big noise in the classroom that it is difficult to concentrate and learn	55,7	47,1	31,3

The reports of school performance quality data announced by the National Agency for School Evaluation in 2012 and 2013 show that school teachers do not always respect pupils' needs and not all

pupils are satisfied with the lessons. It could be argued therefore that problem solving culture in schools needs to be changed. Looking for "those at fault" and inadequate disciplinary actions are ineffective solutions to problems in educational practice, also criticized in scientific literature. The evaluators who observe the activities at school and present the external evaluation report afterwards can change neither the school procedures nor community relations. Nevertheless, clearly described observation data and given recommendations help the schools to improve the quality of education and community relations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Human relations at school create favourable conditions for personality development, organizational success and progress. European and Lithuanian education strategies highlight value education, ethics, care for environment, however modernization and technological development, abundance of information, change of economic, social and political conditions, rapid pace of life, strive to meet market needs weaken human relationships, and ethics is often eliminated from human relations.

Although schools discuss values and ethical standards, create rules of behaviour, encouragement and disciplinary systems, there are still cases of simulated relations between teachers and pupils, breaking of rules and hostility provoking behaviour. The content analysis of external school evaluation reports revealed that the overall school microclimate is better than the microclimate in the lesson. This leads to the conclusion that expectations for personal development of each pupil and education attitudes and methods are the key aspects of school performance to be improved. Schools should pay more attention on the teaching and learning of positive attitudes: each community member must care about values and expend more efforts for the development of fruitful relationships.

Positive school community relationship is most often reported in external evaluation reports. From the pupils point of view there are cases of disrespectful behaviour both from the pupils' and the teachers' side. The comparison of pupils and parents views revealed that parents are more positive than pupils about the relations at school. Relations in schools with different social, economic and cultural background were different: lower quality of school community relations and teach-pupil interaction in lessons was observed in schools with poor social-economic background and lower secondary schools.

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