

## Safe and Stimulating Learning Environment

**Marija Lah**

International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia

mari.lah05@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*A safe and stimulating learning environment is very important. Not only for students but also for teachers. It is important for everyone involved in the learning process to feel good about having space for learning, mistakes, conversation, and safety. All of this is related to the performance of individuals, the school and the whole system. We must be aware that each individual is an individual. For this reason, we need to adapt the conditions to different types of personalities so that they can develop and grow in a supportive environment.*

*The work of educators does not only affects performance in the learning area but also in all other areas. Learning processes and a stimulating environment enable the acquisition of skills that benefit in general in life. There are various aspects of a safe and stimulating learning environment. Continuous training is needed to enable quality work and confrontation with modern society.*

**Keywords:** Education, stimulating environment, learning process, individuals, guidelines

### INTRODUCTION

Through learning, we develop not only intellectual abilities but also the whole individual. Learning processes and a stimulating environment enable the acquisition of skills that benefit in general in life - lifelong learning, conflict resolution, communication, etc. Educators need to be aware of the importance of our role and encourage the individual to reach his or her potential. We know the various guidelines for ensuring appropriate conditions within the education system. Models have been developed to improve the quality of work. More training and education on similar topics would be needed, as many educators in today's society are lost when they can no longer cope with new generations. Educators need to be able to adapt to changes in society.

### THEORETICAL POINTS

Safe and stimulating learning environment is covered by the concept of school culture and climate. Whether it is ideal or bad, it implements everyone involved. Because of this, it is important in terms of

cooperation, trust, friendship, openness ... It is a value system of a school that has been unwritten and reflects in the behavior, expectations, habits, and prejudice. It is formed spontaneously, automatically. It is very hard to change it. An encouraging culture gives personal security, orientation, stability (Brejc and Širok, 2019). A safe and stimulating learning environment is written by various authors. Mikuš Kos (1992) discusses the protective factors, which are very important components of a positive environment. This is especially important for children coming from families with social-economical problems. School can be an escape from reality for them. A place where they can build their self-esteem and self-confidence. Blustein (2001) points out the importance of all factors in the environment. She describes an emotionally secure school as a school where students have a sense of belonging, acceptance, value, respect, can do mistakes, experience success. Consistency, the experience of security, freedom to decide one's learning, security against prejudice in discrimination, freedom to express one's emotions in opinion are very important. She also mentions the threats on which pedagogs need to be aware of – too difficult tasks, unclear instructions, lack of help, support, materials and time.

A quality learning environment enables the development of quality relationships. As a result, the perception of the school is also more positive. In classes with good teacher support, students' self-esteem is higher as there are more involvement and social contact between them. Students with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve higher achievement through a safe and supportive environment (Brejc and Širok, 2019). A safe and stimulating learning environment is important for children with disabilities. For the most part, we are tolerant of those whose deficits are visible from the outside. Children with disabilities generally do not get sufficient understanding. The problem is the belief that the only good is what is in the majority. Ignorance can stimulate people's unexplained fear of the unknown and create stereotypes. We need to teach our children from an early age to accept and respect differentness. We need to answer their questions so that they can understand more easily. They are grown by an example as they adopt our patterns of behavior. They can be approached with different activities: writing with a non-dominant hand, communicating with the pantomime, leadership of the blind, etc. We must have zero tolerance for violence. Only like that, we will provide a safe and stimulating environment for all (Kesič Dimic, 2015). Relationships affect the well-being, expression, experience, and openness of individuals. They must be based on respect, trust, cooperation, encouragement, and inclusion. Through appropriate relationships, we reinforce feelings of security, self-worth, positive self-image. We must allow free expression, mistakes, and give constructive feedback. Communication can tell us a lot because we express ourselves through it. We must listen and respond. It is crucial to the relationships and the educator is the one communication depends on. This makes it desirable that an educator is a warm person with a democratic educational style. With such a person, the child feels safe, accepted, free to explore. It all starts with kindergarten. Co-operation between parents and kindergarten is crucial as the child experiences the world around them by experiencing loved ones as well. The good or bad atmosphere can be conditioned by subjective or objective factors. Subjective are those that originate in the individual - a child, an educator, a parent. This includes communication. However, objective reasons are related to space, group or lack of educational resources (Čas and Krajnc, 2015).

Peček Čuk and Lesar (2009) write about discipline as a way of achieving the respect for norms and rules. Children need to be disciplined in order to achieve their educational goals. Inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. Preventive discipline is required to ensure safety, which helps to avoid potential disciplinary problems. This can be done by providing a relaxed and stimulating climate, preparation and the organization of the learning process. At the initial signs of inappropriate behavior, we use a

supportive discipline where we use corrective techniques to direct inappropriate behavior to the appropriate. However, corrective discipline is used to correct disruptive, asocial and repulsive behaviors. The discipline can be practiced in different ways - verbal (criticism) and non-verbal (eye contact). It is important to explain to the child what he or she did wrong. They must be aware of the violations. We need to give feedback, which should not criticize the child's personality. Instead of saying: "You were rude." We have to say: "Your words were rude." The authors also wrote some disciplining tips. The punishment must be individual, we should not punish too often, we must be fair and consistent, and the punishment must have a beginning and an end.

The criteria and descriptors of a safe and stimulating learning environment can be defined in different ways. Examples: year plan, praise and complaint system, tutoring, mediation, team learning, zero tolerance for violence, protocols for addressing violence, projects, professional assistance (Brejc and Širok, 2019). The Institute of Education of the Republic of Slovenia developed procedures for advising kindergartens in researching their own activity. In doing so, they want to create a culture of a learning community. Different models of support for schools and kindergartens are presented. They are assisted by internal and external evaluation. Based on data and needs, the kindergarten identifies development priorities for several years and determines the order of implementation. Counselors at the Institute are ready to provide support in all steps, to advise and cooperate (Zorman, 2006).

A safe and stimulating learning environment needs to be constantly evaluated. In Slovenia, an Inclusive School Handbook called Inclusive School has been produced. It discusses standards and indicators that are based on the question of what kind of learning environment should be put in place in order to facilitate and promote professional learning and to achieve optimal student development in different fields. Areas of inclusion, security, relationships, information, communication, and educational strategies are highlighted (Brejc and Širok, 2019). The question arises as to how to identify, ensure and improve quality in education. The Slovenian Institute for Quality and Metrology introduced a model of quality assurance and determination. They want to set up learning organizations that can adapt to user's needs. The model consists of four fundamental principles: a culture of learning by experience, a culture of a systems approach, a culture of partnership and a culture of integrity. They are used to identify unwanted conditions and eliminate the consequences of errors. It is important that we learn from the mistakes and correct the causes for them. However, they warn that any situation resists change, which can reduce security. The model emphasizes the importance of the role of all participants and the various processes between them - communication, education, cooperation, updating, etc. The model Quality for the Future is designed to deliver goals such as self-evaluation and quality improvement in education. The fulfillment of the requirements of the model and the achievement of the set goals are checked at two levels - external and internal assessment. After successful grading, the institution receives the Quality Certificate for the Future of Education and the right to use the sign and flag. Once a year, they re-check requirements (Zavrl, Kiauta, & Loncner; 2006).

Researches show the beneficial effects of an appropriate learning environment. Participants have better learning conditions, are more successful, involved. In Slovenia, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys were conducted. They found that a positive school climate had a significant impact on students' achievement, teachers participated better, there was more teamwork, active student involvement, and greater commitment to learning. This demonstrates the importance of a safe and stimulating learning environment that raises the motivation of the participants, their results and their positive attitudes towards education. Research has shown that an open school climate is linked to trust to the principal

and co-workers. A stronger sense of belonging, inclusion, building a stimulating learning environment, respect and trust are created. Various quality indicators are also identified. Among other things, the importance of information flow, mutual relations, strengthening of relations with external co-workers, participation in decision making and promotion of autonomy are mentioned (Brejc and Širok, 2019).

## **OBSERVATION AND PRACTICE**

Through observation, I wanted to see how a supportive and safe environment is strengthened in practice. I observed in one of the kindergartens in Slovenia. I was in their unit, which has four groups. I spent most of my time with children between the ages of four and six. I noticed the way of working, relationships, space, cooperation between employees, etc.

It is important that everyone contributes to the well-being of learning, the functioning of the school and the care for a stimulating and safe learning environment. It all starts with good adult relationships. The kindergarten staff worked well in pairs to plan the day together. Competition between pairs was sometimes present, which can worsen relationships between co-workers. Collaboration could provide better quality work, child participation, transitioning between activities, learning younger from older, teamwork, loaning material, etc. Play is especially important in pre-school. It changes attitudes towards reality, enables the development of different skills, helps to learn a language, cooperative skills, develops relationships, strengthens communication. Working in different fields is important. I also find it very important to work with parents.

Many times, employees told they miss teambuilding. The only option for good teamwork is a meeting once a month, but it is not enough. Work and planning are facilitated by the number of employees, but due to the variety of working hours, this is still difficult. This makes the role of leadership very important in planning training and additional activities. They have to listen to the employees and their desires, needs.

In the group of oldest children is a girl who comes from a family with a difficult experience. Her father was badly injured. His physical and mental capacities had diminished to the point where he became dangerous to other family members. This period was very challenging for the girl. The co-workers decided to work with her mother on how they could make it easier for the girl. They have set up a quiet corner in the playroom, in which anyone can withdraw if they want peace and relaxation. They can draw there, rest, observe others ... They cuddled her if she needed, talked to her about emotions, listened. It is important to be able to recognize and adapt to the needs of children. Of course, the results are not immediate, but they are very important. In cases like this, the involvement of everyone in the environment - parents, employees, leaders - is very important.

The big problem nowadays is ignorance of language and discrimination based on race and religion. The role of educators who care about the welfare of all children is important here. We need to be patient, empowered, fight against violence, set clear rules and expectations. We must show that we too are persons with emotions. Our profession is not easy and sometimes it is very difficult to remain calm. We need to be able to react quickly but still thoughtfully. In the course of their work, some employees used reflection that they performed in writing or orally with a co-worker or individually. But every day, the majority of pairs evaluates and determines the achievements of goals and possible improvements. Educators shape a good climate by raising educational strategies. We need to be prepared to change and

improve as appropriate teaching strategies, methods, and forms of work contribute to creating a safe and stimulating environment.

It is important for children and adults in school to feel accepted and safe. In order to provide a good learning environment for children, it is necessary to promote communication, expression of emotions and needs, conflict resolution, etc. In the group of the oldest children, they discussed Children's Rights and became acquainted with different cultures, religions, races, and positions of children around the world. They met different toys, saw the work of children around the world, learned about rights and illustrated them. The children themselves recognized their own privileges, such as accessibility of food and drink, clothing, family. Educators tried to provide a safe and stimulating environment in various ways. The playroom is equipped with facilities adapted to different learning types. Depending on the topics, the images are changed. They also do exhibitions, shows, theatre, dance workshops, etc. In the morning circle, educators listen to the wishes of the children who are trying to adjust them according to the theme and space.

We cannot avoid discipline in our work. It's not just about order and obedience. It is important for a safe and supportive environment to know the proper disciplines. We should not criticize the person as such, but behavior that we do not accept and tolerate. Only in this way, we will tell the child that we love him, but we do not like his behavior, which he has to change. Because punishment must be something unpleasant for an individual, it depends on the child. The educators said that disciplining was difficult at first because they did not know the children. They agreed to be consistent and harmonized in disciplining. In the first month, they met and agreed on the rules of the group, which were placed in a prominent place. The children repeatedly warned each other, but in a nice and respectful way. Example: When a boy was nagging during a dice game, the girl took his arm and led him to the rules. She showed him a picture of children playing and said we don't fight but share toys. They also often calmed down when they were too loud. When educators met the children, disciplining was easier. They realized what was uncomfortable for a particular child. When children had minor conflicts, they let them settle on their own. If children are not too upset, they try to involve them in disciplining. They ask them what punishment they consider appropriate for their act. They are often more critical than educators.

In the kindergarten, they have a counselor who is supposed to provide help and support to children, parents, and employees. She operates on the principles of child welfare, voluntariness, and confidentiality. She represents an important link between kindergarten and the external environment. Parents can consult with her about integrating their child into kindergarten or school, development, critical situations and changes, difficulties, etc. The headmistress posted her vision of kindergarten on the website, stating, among other things, that they provide children with warmth and safety. She urged parents that comprehensive child care is important for the quality development of the child, so we need to work hand in hand. The vision of the kindergarten was also written in a publication, which did not specifically state guidelines for providing a safe and stimulating environment.

One of the basic human needs is safety, which in education is often associated with communication, acceptance, praise, expectations, etc. For this reason, it is important to adapt all processes to the developmental stage of children. The educators in the kindergarten tried to adapt all activities and teaching to children's abilities, while at the same time encouraging them to progress, so they challenged them a little harder. Children's experiences and reactions were closely observed by educators.

The space is very small, which was a big challenge for the employees. Playrooms are smaller and they do not have a gym. Only a smaller hallway and outdoor spaces are available. This often prevents certain activities from being performed. The problem is bigger when children are irritated and in need of movement, which, for example, cannot be enabled in bad weather.

## CONCLUSION

In order to provide a stimulating and safe learning environment, it is necessary to involve the entire environment, both students and their parents, teachers and other professionals. We must strive for justice, respect, equality, positive relationships. Security is very important as it is the basis for meeting the higher needs. It is important that everyone contributes to the well-being of learning, the functioning of the school and the care for a stimulating and safe learning environment.

Various guidelines and models are outlined to give us guidance on providing the right environment. We need to be aware of its importance. Continuous evaluation with all participants is needed.

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