Stanko Gerjolj & Roman Globokar & Andreja Vidmar

Creating Good Class Community as the Key to Successful Learning

The entire school and staff are undoubtedly responsible for creating positive work atmosphere. However, people are capable of forming and also living a limited number of intensive relationships. Therefore, from this point of view it is class the community which contributes the most to creating collective work atmosphere and identity. Students meet there on a daily basis, spend a lot of time together and through mutual cooperation tie bonds, which with a thorough cooperation of their class teacher strengthen their feeling of belonging to the group and create a strong feeling of »us«.

Forming collective identity cannot be done shallowly. Growing up is full of intensive and deep experiencing. It is in this life period that seemingly unimportant situations or events are highly dramatic and complicated. Therefore, it is of great importance that class communication develops through personal relationships rather than »business« relationships. Students in class are not colleagues but friends. The main class teacher's role is not solving the problems and managing the class but encouraging life and work in it. On the one hand young people need a lot of opportunities for sharing personal experiences and feelings, on the other hand it is exactly in this area that they feel powerless and incompetent, thus tend to escape from such challenges and avoid them. A class teacher's mastery is to set up opportunities for personal communication to develop and upgrade it with team work atmosphere. On the personal communication level students learn how to understand and accept each other while in common projects they use these personal and other differences for constructive and inventive cooperation.

1. Character, Anxiety and Community

In his book Grundformen der Angst (Basic Types of Anxiety) Fritz Riemann states four types of anxious personalities. Each of them can lead to uncontrolled emotional outbursts which are not only disturbing for himself/herself but also for their environment. That is why striving for positive atmosphere and good communication in class is of utmost importance, especially in the adolescence.

The first group consists of persons with mostly schizoid characteristics, who aim at independence and autonomy *(Riemann 2003, 20)*. Being able to hide and control their personal emotional life in everyday situations is typical of them. They are keen on talking about general issues, but they lack words in personal conversations. It is believed they »run« from permanent personal relationships because they are afraid of losing their own freedom and uniqueness *(Riemann 2003, 26)*. They are usually very diligent and good organizers. They are popular with their peers although they are rather shallow when it comes to personal relationships. They have many friends with whom they share equal relationships. Flirting is an option, but they do not want permanent bonds with anybody.

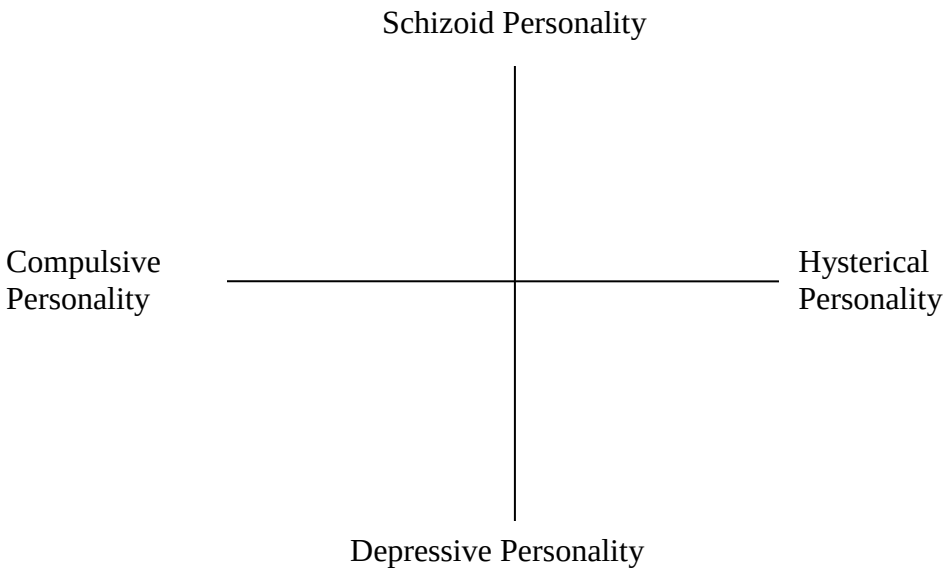
The second group consists of persons with characteristics of depression.[1] They yearn for closeness and wish to be »utterly« accepted. Wishing to depend they are forgetting about their »self« and about the other »self« *(Riemann 2003, 68)*, so they know very well how to »subtly« burden themselves and others with moaning, jealousy and judgement. At first they are accepted and comforted in the group but gradually people turn their backs on them, avoiding them, which bring additional sadness to their lives. Such people sometimes wish to change their group, and if they do it, the same thing repeats all over again.

[1] Depression mentioned here is not a disease, it is a character trait

In the third group are compulsive personalities who fear changes. If these nevertheless occur, they usually take sides. Their typical characteristics are obedience and discipline. Fearing changes and uncertainty forces them to create »absolute« order and permanent discipline, where creativity cannot exist. This characteristic comes out in partnerships in adulthood as well. Such people more or less "function", they do not love *(Riemann 2003, 120)*. When they get older, these characteristics, especially with religious people, tend to grow into scrupulousness. The root of such behaviour is no self-assurance; therefore such people need strict rules, discipline and routine.[2] Such people do not stand out in a group; their typical response is »what the others will say«. They lose their temper only when a certain change upsets them.

»Artists« who belong to the fourth group do not stand continuity and do not follow consequent connections. Possessing hysterical characteristics they often lose direction and connection with real life and like risking more than the circumstances allow tem to *(Riemann 2003, 158)*. They come up with several suggestions in their group but have difficulty in realising them.[3] What they like best is when they suggest and others work. They find routine and negotiations boring, therefore they occasionally »must« argue, even without any reason. They work and learn at a moment's notice, functioning according to the womb principle, which is an explanation for the Greek word hysteria. But in crucial moments they can exceed others' expectations.

The four types of personalities in a systematically view:



The above mentioned characteristics moulded by our »ratio« do not appear so »clear« in practice *(Riemann 2003, 209)*. They are, however, present a great deal in different shades in all the groups.

[2] The first signs of such behaviour are noticed when a need for a frequent control of our acts appears. Sometimes we »must« double check if we have locked the door, switched the light off, etc. At the same time any disorder annoys us, we go to bed and get up at the same time regardless of circumstances.

[3] Unlike compulsive individuals those with hysterical characteristics constantly talk about wanting to get up early and not being late, they always tidy their apartment, which is far from being clean, etc.

These characteristics are certainly not merely negative and oppressive, but offer a lot of positive and creative life situations. Depressed personalities for instance make the whole group a lot more sensitive towards people in trouble. Schizoid individuals run from pain, trying to avoid it, the depressed ones focus on it and see it where it does not exist at all. So schizoid personalities learn sensibility and empathy from them, the depressed ones on the other hand can learn from the schizoid ones how not get overrun by problems and troubles but accept them. Without depressed personalities a particular class can become a union of colleagues, good at setting clear aims but capable of hurting people when reaching them. Depressed individuals can on the other hand turn into a club of moaners, who shut everybody down and drown in their own problems. It is exactly depressed personalities who help a society acquire the characteristics of a community. Schizoid individuals, however, take care that the class set goals and work.

A similar creative tension is formed by the other two types of personality, compulsive and hysterical personalities. The first ones take care of order, discipline and routine, at the same time they are diligent and effective. Hysterical personalities can always guarantee there is no boredom in the classroom. Even though they can be quiet, usually staying in the background, they are capable of »exploding« in a decisive moment and work in the favour of the whole class when others do not dare to do it. In normal circumstances that can also be the schizoids' domain although they do not want anybody to hold a grudge against them. Hysterical personalities on the other hand like taking risks and do not fear the conflict situations, sometimes they even enjoy them. They would expect a group/a class to protect them, which usually happens.

A diversity of the mentioned personality traits can become a treasure in the class of students who can communicate well and nourish intensive relationships towards each other. Nonetheless, verbal communication is not enough. Young people are becoming more and more visual and less verbal in terms of communication, therefore the mastery of creating community lies in searching as much various forms of communication as possible. This is especially true in cases when young people have to live and work with unprocessed emotions, feelings and experience in their early childhood which are awakened in the dramatic adolescence and therefore influence their performance at school. The fast pace of life and the intensity of susceptibility as well as processing their events and emotions from childhood often results in aggressive reactions which are nothing else than the students' outcry in to be taken seriously by us-adults and their plea to help them build healthy, genuine and sincere relationships.

1.1. Emotional Intelligence and Social learning in Building Good Class Community

"Motivation, emotion, and cognition" are three fundamental mental operations.[4] All three of them are connected to the emotional intelligence and emotional learning processes.

Emotional intelligence can be defined as "the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others" *(Mayer & Salovey 1997, 27*). Whether we will love or hate a particular "object" is not dependent upon only the object itself but also upon the way we "see it" *(Nussbaum 2001, 28*).

Neuropsychology teaches that emotional activity uses at least five brain centers. The visual perception first lands in "Talamus", which "translates" it into the language of the brain and then sends it on toward the visual cortex which disperses to the other interested centers. A

[4] Some psychologists speak of four main mental operations and add conscience to the three above-mentioned ones *(Mayer & Salovey & Caruso 2000, 397)*.

great deal of information involved with emotional perception stops in "Amygdala", the center of as well as a type of warehouse for emotional experiences. If the visual perception is emotionally strong and pressures for a fast reaction, a part of the perception information travels by shortcut from Talamus to Amygdala *(Jensen 2005, 16),* which means that this information by-passed the visual cortex. Accordingly Amygdala received untranslated information and thus sensed an "unusual condition" or rather unusual danger. In such situations a person reacts first, before he knows the "why and how" of a better way to proceed. Information which Amygdala receives via shortcut gives rise to a rather possessed state and these precognitive emotions force a person to react within a moment. Because the information is not modified, the reactions are quick, but also unthinking and often imprecise.[5] Undoubtedly it is possible, that precognitive emotions overwhelm us and bring us to a state where "we do not know what we are doing".

Amydala is also the place of remembering emotions. When we learn deliberate emotional management, Amygdala sends emotional signals to the "frontal cortex" where there are two brain centers named the "prefrontal lobes", which work to further translate emotional experiences. On the basis of these transformed emotional signals, we make decisions and shape emotional experiences. In the right "prefrontal lobe" the negative emotional signals are gathered,[6] the left "prefrontal lobe" is intended to control negative feelings and to master them, in other words to prevent their "eruptions" *(Goleman 1997, 47*). The cooperation of these two centers fulfills the role of "manager" of the emotions and their mastery.

As the storehouse of emotional memories Amygdala many times uses the experiences of early childhood. If we combine the possibility of uncontrolled emotional outbursts as the result of the traveling of information from Talamus to Amygdala with the role of no-verbalized and unmodified emotional experiences from early childhood, many of catastrophic acts of violence by a child, youth or adult becomes quite clear.[7] It goes simply to the moment when untranslated negative emotional information floods Amygdala and then – in some type of tangling of the fear of an infant, bestial strength and technical cognitive abilities – "I do not know what I am doing."[8] In private schools where moral education is usually paid more attention to than in public schools instead of showing external aggressiveness in such stressful situations students tend to feel depressed, which can even lead to suicidal thoughts .

Contemporary knowledge is rather encouraging in that emotional life is not as dependent upon early childhood as was long thought. Although it is trough that in addition to traumatic consequences emotional abuse also causes intellectual damage in other, definitely cognitive areas: abused children or those exposed to stressful situations use the energy intended for learning and (even biological) development of the operation of the brain to put up with pressures and to survive emotionally *(Jensen 2005, 23).* With intense work on himself a person even in his adult years is capable of repairing his relationship with himself and of

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[5] Thus one can be similarly startled by a coiled rope as by a snake and can similarly »recoil« or »attack«.

[6] The whole right brain hemisphere tends to think integrally and to process information in random order *(Jensen 2005, 14)*. Probably man is stronger affected by negative and painful emotions, therefore it is understandable that – considering the role and the way of operation – the right prefrontal lobe is more emotional than the left one.

[7] Modern neuropsychological research confirms that autism, super-activity and many other conspicuous reactions are undoubtedly connected to social education and thereby also to emotional and moral education *(Kihlstrom, Cantor 2000, 374)*.

[8] If in the emotionally exceptionally active adolescence I am bullied by a teacher (or somebody else), this information subconsciously reminds of the feelings of impotence from the early childhood. This negative information floods Amygdala and I react according to the same logic as I did while still an infant. However, since today I am stronger and can shoot, I use this knowledge and "kill" – without thinking.

regulating his emotional life *(Showers 2000, 284)*. Especially in connection with social intelligence throughout life moral and ethical as well as spiritual and religious learning take care of the challenges which a person needs for the formation and development of emotional intelligence. Religion and spirituality namely reflect life through the glasses of the final meaning of life and so imagine emotional feeling and activity too. *(Coles 1999, 148-149)*. Sometimes we are faced with a moral dilemma for the solution of which cognitive abilities alone are insufficient; but we need abilities which enable us to make the right decisions before we thoroughly understand the question.

The previously mentioned cooperation between the left and right "prefrontal lobes' forms a unique intersection where emotional and cognitive thinking touch *(Goleman 1997, 48-49)*. Right here then decisions tied to emotions are formed. Many psychologists and pedagogues see the school-perspective as an increasingly accepted standpoint from which in the processes of learning a symbiosis of cognition and emotionality will grow *(Forgas 2000, 388-389)*. This is the direction suggesting the prospects of integral teaching and learning. As we know, emotional intelligence does not defend the uncontrolled expression of emotions, but it rather strongly and creatively though briefly supports thus fashioned emotional expression, life, and action that it serves life in the arrangement of its "final" meaning.

In Slovenia students start attending grammar school at the age of 15 (this is a secondary school that lasts four years and is completed by students taking the matura exam – an external exam which enables students to proceed their studies at University) after nine years of compulsory primary school.[9] On the one hand being 15 means growing up intensively, on the other hand starting grammar school means a new beginning as well as new life challenges for students. Therefore, processing emotional experiences, also those from childhood, develops according to special rules, where each year of schooling has its own unique characteristics.

In the first year students get to know each other and start forming the class community. All the character traits can be well noticed in this period; therefore it is important to pay a lot of attention to communication with one another. Students face first limitations, for the programme in grammar schools is more demanding than in primary school. Due to the new environment and new challenges they are emotionally calmer. The main emotional problems are linked to occasional despondence which is caused by potential failure.

In the second year student already know each other, the environment is familiar. They are not the youngest ones anymore and by emphasising their adjustment they try to show teachers they have a certain role at school and need to be taken seriously. At this point they function like a union, well acquainted with their rights, yet forgetting their duties. Such attitude can easily get them into trouble, so from this point of view the second year is the most demanding of them all. It is in these conflict situations that students open emotionally and therefore need the most attention in terms of communication. In the last part of the article it is shown conflicts have their roots outside classrooms, often in events from childhood that have not been processed yet. Thereby, students in the second year need the deepest communication and effective processing of emotional experience, which usually deepens their relationships and consequently creates the real class community. If adolescents' emotional dimension is neglected at this point, it is likely a class will divide into subgroups consisting of egocentric individualists.

Efficient work in the first two years enables a development of the well shaped class community in the third year, therefore we can focus on the growth of an individual. In this context students need more opportunities for their personal growth and tend to get overemotional. They speak openly about the unprocessed problems from the previous year and want to face them in a class community.

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[9] In recent years children have started attending primary school at the age of 6 instead of 7, which has added another year to it.

In the fourth year students are more or less an adult who's most important aim is the matura exam. This challenge often causes stressful situations, so they can get more conflictive than expected. A particular oppressed problem from the past might occur, as well as a feeling that a class or an individual have missed out on something in the recent years and need to make up for lost time. Excursions can therefore be exhausting although the problems of this kind are more likely to happen in the first three years. It is vital for the fourth year the matura exam as a maturity exam is a common project of students, a class teacher and other teachers. Consequently, students are motivated, cooperative, and at the same time willing to find time for a special, optional project.

These characteristics are general and can in some cases of course differ from the mentioned above. Besides, one needs to be aware of the fact that students are »problematic«, as long as they are healthy.

1.2. Integral Learning Builds Positive Class Atmosphere

The best way of managing problems is integral learning which includes all dimensions of life – not only cognitive learning but also body, emotionality, spirituality, and religion. One of the important ways of the integrative learning processes is presented by H. Gardner in his theory about Multiple Intelligences; he understands intelligence as a family concept where each "member of the family" has its own place and role and his own method of processing.

In his groundbreaking work, Gardner presents the connectedness of five intelligences (verbal-linguistic, mathematical-logical, spatial-visual, musical-rhythmic and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence) which are important for cognitive learning. In the same work Gardner also presents two "personal intelligences" which regulate communication *(Gardner 1993, 238-239)*. He names in accordance with the method of communication as intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. The first is concerned with communication within with the self, the second with communication between persons. Both intelligences are strongly socially oriented and largely correspond to the criteria considered by some psychologists as characteristic of »social intelligence« *(Kihilstrom & Cantor 2000, 364-365)*.[10] Even though according to Gardner's theory, each intelligence has its own unique methods of operation, they are from the viewpoint of learning processes complementary and strongly interconnected *(Kihlstrom & Cantor 2000, 364)*.

Such integral teaching encourages communication and learning. Contemporary neurobiology has found out everything we experience through relationships is transmitted into biological signals by our brains, which influence our abilities and behaviour, which yet again results in communication *(Bauer 2007, 15-16)*. This means positive communication strengthens our abilities which train us for better relationships. Negative communication and bad relationships numb our learning, working abilities, which additionally weakens communication skills. Stress, fear of failure and humiliation are all »the killers of learning« *(Bauer 2007, 37)*. There are three types of neurobiological signals which are of vital importance for learning and working. This »genius threesome« consists of dopamine which gives zest for work, persistence and strain, opioide hormones which assure we feel physically and emotionally well, and oxytozine which motivates us to like being among people and feeling connected to others *(Bauer 2007, 19)*.

Although the first task of grammar school teachers is teaching, the methods of teaching as well as communication are of crucial importance. And last but not least, helping students in

[10] In his newer works he adds, as having equal value, "naturalistic intelligence", which places us in context with the environment especially with nature and her laws, and enables us to "understand" the dynamic of this context and to work with it *(Gardner 1999, 48-52)*.

the class community feel well is not to be ignored either. The examples described below do not only show the importance of these but also give us a vision of what can be done in this field. They are by no means the only good models. Yet they possess optimism telling us it is worth trying and doing something good.

2. Class Community as a Place for Education at the Diocesan Classical Grammar School (Ljubljana)

2.1. Some basic facts about the Diocesan Classical Grammar School (Ljubljana)

The Diocesan Classical Grammar School at St. Stanislav's Institution is one of the four catholic schools in Slovenia. It was founded by the Bishop of Ljubljana Anton Bonaventura Jeglič in 1905 and is of remarkable meaning for the Slovene educational system and for the history of our nation for it was the first Slovene grammar school. During the Communist's reign the building was used as barracks for the Yugoslav Army, while the school was officially closed (abolished). After the democratic changes, the school started its mission again in the renovated Institution in autumn 1993.

In this school year there are 707 students (boys and girls between the ages 15 and 19) in four grade levels divided into 22 parallel classes. About a third of them reside in the boarding school of St. Stanislav's Institution. Since 1997 1531 students have already taken the matura exams.

The school is open to everyone regardless of their religious belief. Although, before enrolling, parents and students commit themselves to the Christian orientation of the school and its rules. Regular lessons are financed by the state, additional program by the parents themselves with a monthly contribution and material costs by the owner, e.g. the Archdiocese of Ljubljana.

In all the fourteen years of renewed work, our school has become recognized in the sphere of the Slovene Educational System. The results of the matura exams have placed us among the best ones in Slovenia from the very beginning.

	DCGS	Slovenia
MATURA 1997 A	21,5	18,21
MATURA 1998 A	23,34	18,66
MATURA 1999 A	22,86	18,63
MATURA 2000 A	22,82	18,65
MATURA 2001 A	23,19	18,76
MATURA 2002 A	23,60	19,28
MATURA 2003 A	21,20	18,94
MATURA 2004 A	23,44	19,22
MATURA 2005 A	22,87	19,33
MATURA 2006 A	24,66	19,90

A remarkable success has been achieved also in various national and international competitions.

There are some important activities of the Diocesan Classical Grammar School, among which choir singing has become the most important one. There are five choirs in which almost half of our students participate. Choir singing has a long tradition in Slovenia and it supports the pedagogical direction of our school. Since singing in the choir is a very specific activity that embraces rehearsals and performances on the stage, it is easier for children to join

and adjust themselves to the group. Moreover, their sense of socialization is developed better as well as the feeling of belonging to the group. As a result, they have high standards of moral values. It has been proven that children are healthier and the atmosphere at school is more pleasant since children are more disciplined. They cherish and develop the sense of aesthetics and beauty, patience and concentration can be passed on to them. It is also proven that they are more successful when it comes to common educational subjects and they have a feeling of one's own value. Our choirs regularly receive the first prizes whenever they take part in competitions in Slovenia.

Our students can participate in different sports clubs, the School of Fine Arts or drama and various free time activities.

2.2. The importance of Class Community

In the 14 years of development of the Diocesan Classical Grammar School the Class Community has become the central place of our educational program. Lessons are mainly organized in the way that the whole class attends them, with an exception of the 4th classes which are formed according to the subjects chosen for matura exams. Once a week each class has the so called class meeting with a class teacher. It is intended for the exchange of information and suggestions with enough space for various topics connected with upbringing. Such themes can be prepared by the students themselves, by the school counselor or class teacher and sometimes by invited guests. This kind of meeting gives the opportunity to solve the conflicts among students or between students and teachers. The main role in such a debate is of course in the hands of the class teacher.

In the field of spiritual life the class community also carries the central role. A spiritual thought (or prayer) is read at the beginning and end of the school day. Spiritual retreats are organized for each class once a year. It takes place in natural surroundings and lasts three days. A class comes closer during this time, any tensions that may exist are sorted out, the students have the opportunity to look into themselves. Spiritual retreats are led by the teachers of religious education accompanied by class teachers. We start Advent with liturgy in classes, while during the whole period students plan to set up class Christmas crib based on a certain motto chosen by the priests responsible for the spiritual guidance. They show their creativity which is often a result of their amazing imagination, students come together and their original ideas are gradually accepted by everyone in the class. In most cases, students themselves carry out different tasks; sometimes they need some help from their class teacher. In Advent and Lent classes attend services (masses) before lessons start in the school chapel. It is not obligatory to attend them, but students like to come as they can participate with singing, intercessions and introductions. The idea of class services is to create a common praying community and awareness that we are a gift to one another and therefore also responsible for one another.

To be creative in the field of arts is also a strong element that binds class communities together. (We have already mentioned the class Christmas cribs). A singing festival takes place each year and several class communities enter the competition. The participation of class communities is above 90%. Classes are formed into choirs and a student from a class takes the role of the conductor. In this way they gain the skills necessary for organizing and carrying out common projects. The students also carry out a drama festival where they compete in performing on stage. The participation of students is lower, but nevertheless half of all classes participate. Different sports competitions between classes are organized as well. They carry through the matches and organize cheering to support the teams.

Socializing plays an important part when it comes to formation of class communities, where trust and the concept of giving are of great importance. Each year school organizes class excursions abroad, they are not important only because of their educational role but even more to enable students to come closer personally. First-year students visit North Italy, second-year students go to Vienna (3 days), and third-year students spend seven days in France, Spain, Greece, Germany or Denmark, depending on which second foreign language they learn. The fourth year students go to Rome (6 days) before graduating. There is also a final excursion at the end of the school year for each class separately and of course the excursion after the matura exams, the destination of which is up to students.

The experiences show that establishing good relationships, evoking trust in one another, stimulating help and solidarity can also represent a basis for intellectual growth in the period of their secondary schooling. A school is not only responsible for providing knowledge in the best possible manner, but it should also establish a pleasant atmosphere to help young people during the period of their intensive personal growth. We are more and more convinced that the school community is a suitable place for exceeding the contemporary tendencies of individualism, for stimulating students' creativity, team work and the sense of responsibility and solidarity. If we strive to achieve better personal relationships, good results are sure to come also in the sphere of intellectual work.

2.3. Plans for the Future

The key person in binding a class together is of course the class teacher. He/she has a fulltime obligation as a teacher teaching his/her own subject and taking care of a class represents an additional obligation. We are trying to find a better way to help the class teachers. Therefore we plan to train the teachers who have an active role in classes in the next school year. We shall also start with a project of personal development *My Way* in which every student will have her/his personal file. The purpose of this kind of project is to help students organize their daily work at school, to keep a record of their achievements as they go along and plan their future work. *My Way* should help students to gain self-confidence and better self-image. The class teacher is going to play an important role when it comes to making this file, for he or she is going to have a brief individual meeting with each student in which they will set the student’s plans for the future concerning education and personal growth in the period of schooling.

3. Class Community at the Diocesan Grammar School A. M. Slomšek (Maribor)

The Diocesan Grammar School A. M. Slomšek, founded by the Maribor diocese, is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year and is one of the four catholic schools for students aged 15-18 in Slovenia. It shares more or less the same programme with the other three catholic schools, paying a lot of attention to the class community and putting effort into building a positive class atmosphere.

According to the recent survey conducted at all four catholic schools, the number of students who are non-believers is the highest at our school. Besides, it is the only catholic school located in the north-eastern part of Slovenia.

At first sight differences students as well as teachers face at school seem to be a gap that cannot be bridged easily. However, from the viewpoint of diversity they offer precious and numerous opportunities for learning, learning from each other, teaching each other as well as learning how to cohabit, to coexist and thus work on problems students will certainly have to

cope with in their future life, too. And this is exactly what I personally find extremely important when working with teenagers.

3.1. Applying Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Intelligences to Class Meetings

In his book Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom Thomas Armstrong quotes Howard Gardner: "It is of the outmost importance that we all recognize and nurture all the varied human intelligences, and all of the combinations of the intelligences. We are all so different largely because we all have different combinations of intelligences. If we recognize this, I think we will have at least a better chance of dealing appropriately with the many problems that we face in the world" *(Armstrong 1997, 1).*

As an English teacher I try to take into the consideration all seven intelligences when teaching. Implementing them in my teaching methods I therefore wish to encourage students to get to know their talents, see their strengths, be aware of their weaknesses and consequently develop their potential and improve their performance at school.

Should all the intelligences have more or less an equally important role in any teaching, it is vital to search for ways to develop them in ourselves. Thomas Armstrong explains how important it is that before we apply any model of learning in a classroom environment, we should first apply it to ourselves as educators and adult learners. Therefore it will become apparent how our particular fluency in each of seven intelligences affects our competence in various roles we have as educators *(Armstrong 1997, 16).*

Being aware that my stronger intelligences as a teacher are the interpersonal and the intrapersonal ones, which undoubtedly affects my teaching, I have seen the opportunity to develop my learning and teaching by applying these two intelligences to my work in the so called class meetings which take place once a week.

One can easily be tempted to use the class meeting as a "bureaucratic" lesson dealing with sick notes, unauthorised absences or never ending discussions on appropriate behaviour and ways of punishment if rules are not followed. Of course, for a class teacher these tasks are unavoidable but can be done much more efficiently provided he/she is dealing with the class' "demands" on a different level.

3.2. The Importance of Class Meetings in the Second Year

2.c consists of 27 students in their second year of schooling. It embodies a wide range of personalities. At first sight and also from what I see as their English teacher the class is loud, active, cannot sit still for a very long time and gets highly motivated when bodily-kinaesthetic or spatial activities take place. The students are innovative and, if given support and encouragement, usually successful at realising their ideas. Some students get in conflict with teachers, they dare to express their own opinion and give comments, regardless of the consequences. Strict rules do not work with them, therefore they tend to be unruly, especially if the lessons are not interesting and the methods not varied enough. In seeking attention some students' reactions result in outbursts, provocative behaviour, wanting to be in the centre of attention at any price or silence. With such attitude they tend to upset some teachers who feel they have lost control, but in general due to their willingness to work they are quite popular with teachers. By regularly meeting their parents I got well acquainted with their family background situations. Among them there are students coming from dysfunctional families, families where parents are divorced or separated or single parent families. Some are the only children; some come from families with three, four or even five children. Those needing

special attention face abuse and violence within their own families. A student suffering from muscular dystrophy needs constant help provided by students themselves or his personal assistant.

All these characteristics and the students' wish the subgroups (which apparently started forming) would get to know each other better initiated my decision it was the right time and the opportunity to do something in terms of communication and their relationships towards each other. Also, I noticed a great deal of inconsiderate, even intolerant behaviour, which made the classroom community atmosphere frequently tense. Some felt superior, others felt neglected. Bunking-off and breaking school rules increased. The tension and stress probably contributed to some students' poorer performance at school. Still, the students did not stop arguing, which in my view usually serves as a good starting point for solving problems. All these contributed to the idea something "had to be done" or better something "was possible to be done".

A set of 20 class meeting lessons were carried out in order to improve the class community atmosphere and to build, rebuild or deepen students' relationships with one another. The methods I used focused on students' processing events in their past and current situations in their families. In the following paragraphs the steps, the methods and the content of these meetings are described. One lesson is 45 minutes long, so in my opinion a double lesson or several consecutive lessons are the best option for such work.

Lesson: 1

Time: 45 minutes

Aim: To introduce the activity, to visualise a tree through guided meditation

Procedure: Make space in the classroom, placing all the desks and chairs to the sides. Prepare blank sheets of paper and instrumental music. Tell the students to find the most comfortable place in the classroom.

Students sit on the floor. While music is played, students follow guided meditation read by a teacher. They either visualise it with their eyes closed or move their bodies in accordance with what they see in their mind.

Considering my students are comfortable using body movement I chose the second option. This particular meditation focused on the growing of a tree in four seasons; on changes, challenges, difficulties this tree has to go through in every season. The text I used is described below.

"You are walking, feeling the softness of the grass beneath your feet. Listen carefully, you might hear the stream. Watch the trees you see and go closer to the one you find most appealing. Touch it, perhaps hold it and ask it what it has already gone through, what it has experienced…Picture yourself being its seed which is blown into the soil by the wind. There you can fall into a deep sleep. You don't know what is going on around you…

You are wakening up by the moisture of the soil; you feel the urgent need to live. Feeling something moves inside, the seed starts to grow. There is ease and optimism inside you which helps you grow and find the way towards the light. The spring gayness and warmth give you strength, leaves pop up…You grow into a strong tree playing with a breeze. When you grow up, you find out the sun brings heat and drought. It's difficult and painful to endure and withstand thirst and to feel dried up roots. My branches and the crown must cope with these as well…

In the autumn storms occur. I have to face strong winds which threaten my stability. I feel rain can turn into painful hail sometimes, hitting and hurting me…

But now the winter comes…. I can still fight coldness, but feel I'm losing power. The best way of coping with snow and chill is dozing off. Luckily, spring is coming again. Everything in me will wake up. Again, my leaves, branches and fruits start growing…. I give the seeds to the wind which takes them to the new beginning…"

Lesson: 2

Time: 45 minutes

Aim: To draw the tree they visualised

Procedure: Give out blank sheets of paper to each student and make crayons available to everybody. Students choose a tree they remember the most from meditation and draw a picture of it. They take time, use as many colours as possible and try not to talk with each other. They take as much time as they need and decide when to finish individually. Music is played again. Students took the drawing seriously, some putting more effort into it than others.

Lesson: 3

Time: 30-45 minutes

Aim: To make groups in which pictures will be dealt with

Procedure: Arrange chairs in three circles. Invite students to sit down in one circle and decide whether they feel comfortable. Do three "rounds" giving the student the opportunity to change their mind.

In our lesson one group ended up having more members than the other two (I did not want them to feel being pushed into a group they did not feel comfortable with). Since I wanted the students to get to know each other better, after the first session with each group the members were randomly mixed.

Lessons: 4-16

Time: Each group spends 3-4 lessons together

Aim: To work with pictures, to get to know oneself better, to get to know and understand each other better

Procedure:

1. The students sit in a circle. A volunteer puts his/her drawing in the middle of it.

2. The first question everybody including the author answers is "**What do you see?**" Make sure everybody concentrates on what they see (a big tree, colourful leaves, a hole in the trunk, no roots, falling leaves, dry wigs, the sun, clouds, rain, snow, etc.) and do not interpret it (You cannot see love, happiness, etc) at this point.

3. The second sentence each has to complete is "**If I were this particular part of the tree (e.g. the branch, the trunk, the leaves, the animal… in this picture), I would feel…"** A variation that I used in some cases was: **"I would feel well if I were (this item in the picture), I would feel bad if I were (this item in the picture)."** Students usually commented on why they would feel like that.

4. The third step gathers the **titles** each member of the group gives to the drawing. The author of the picture gives his/her title as well and at the end chooses the title he/she likes best.

5. Working with the picture concludes with the **wishes** every member of the group tells to the particular tree, picture.

6. With most of the groups I rounded the lesson off by reflecting on what we have been doing. The students completed the sentence "**If I look back, I have found out/I have realised/I know…"**

All the questions answered and sentences completed took place in no previously arranged order. They decided when they were ready to give their comments.

The students were actively engaged, committed, probably because they were all aware it was their pictures, themselves and their lives, concerns, fears, pain, joy that were "discussed". They were spontaneous in giving their responses; they listened attentively, used their sense of humour and listened to each other. I was there to guide them; some of the groups wished my

comments on the picture as well. One important piece of advice I gave them was that everything was allowed to be said about one's picture, yet it was up to them to decide what to pay attention to and what to ignore. The most common comments they gave when finishing the sentence "**If I look back I have realised…"** were**: "***… how different we are, how important it is not to judge before you get to know the person, ... that everybody is entitled to their own opinion, … that the picture represents my characteristics, … you saw what I didn't see at all, … sometimes we have to face the same problems, … I was surprised what you could see, … I exposed myself in this picture, … I want to be too perfect, … my tree has no roots, … my tree has no leaves, … the wind has made a mess in my picture, … there is no sun in my picture, … there is only a seed in his picture, … I didn't know she could draw so well …".*

Lessons: 17, 18
Time: 60-90 minutes
Aim: To reflect on the work with the entire class
Procedure:

1. Students sit in a big circle with their pictures in front of them. They finish the following sentence: **"If I look back at the course of the lessons dealing with our pictures I will never forget…"** Again, students speak in no particular order. Some comments were touching, I was surprised what they remembered and paid attention to. Some gave humorous remarks which reminded us all of having enjoyed the time spent together.
2. Students are told to go out in nature and try to find a "symbol", an item (a flower, a plant, a cone, a stone, a piece of wood….), symbolizing themselves in terms of what their picture represents and what they are willing to do in the future. They also pick an item for a school mate (I told them who to pick it for).
3. Students present the symbols and explain why they have chosen them. They give them to their school mates.

It was obvious some students were very perceptive. The symbols spoke for themselves; trees without leaves or roots or fruits for instance got ones, dry soil got water, trees got fruits, animals, blossoms…etc. I got the feeling they were proud of having found out something about themselves or each other they did not know before.

Lessons: 19, 20
Time: 60 minutes
Aim: To attend Mass, to conclude work, to add a religious dimension

The service took place in the same classroom we worked in. A priest teaching Religion and Culture held the service. We incorporated our work and the pictures in some parts of the service. In context with the penitential rite students were asked to complete the following sentence: **"I acknowledge…".** By looking at their picture they found or remembered fears, dilemmas, and worries, painful events they acknowledged and then expressed them out loud. They did not need to be specific when using words as long as they knew what they had in mind (e.g. if they acknowledged they were hurting, they would say **I acknowledge a branch that was cut from the tree**). After saying it out loud the students placed his/her picture in front of the altar. After each acknowledgement the students would reply **Lord, have mercy**.

For general intercessions the students thought of their own intercessions connected to the individual pictures or the class community in general. Some of the most interesting ones were: "***I wish all the trees would get water to grow, I wish the sun wouldn't be crying but smiling, I wish the sun wouldn't burn the trees, I wish strong roots for one tree, I wish the crowns to***

***host birds, I wish our class could survive the rain and the heat**."* After each intercession we would reply **Lord, hear our prayer**.

After the communion the students were asked to finish the sentence **I am thankful for/to...** Again, they could thank for a particular feature in their own picture, event, others' pictures or a person they had got closer to in the process.

Although I somehow thought the students who are not religious would be reluctant to take part in the mass, the whole "event" turned out well. The students entered it with respect towards each other and cooperated actively, not only passively in the "common" parts. After all, it was something they had created themselves.

3.3. Class Community and Class Meetings Open the Door to Personal Growth

The goal of the class meetings I described was to make students understand each other better by getting to know what it is that they posses and feel inside themselves. I believe personal relationships with people we live and work will help us discover who we really are. The students I worked with did not become best friends after the activities we went through. That was not my intention in the first place. What they were offered was the opportunity to empathize with their school mates, relate to them and their lives and try to understand where their (own) reactions come from. In our class meetings they might have faced fears and their own vulnerabilities; they might have been exposed in their insecurity, failure or faultlessness, but were nevertheless not judged or mocked. They felt they could be respected for characteristics they possess.

However, it is not only the students who can benefit from the class meetings. I have learnt from students relationships are not about winning or losing, they are not flawless or to be taken for granted either. They are about giving and gaining. It is exactly the students and our relationships that have helped me greatly not only to grow as a teacher but also to grow as a person.

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