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Article

Psychological Safety and Academic Engagement of University Students

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Abstract: This article presents an analysis of the structural features of engagement among students of higher education institutions. It examines the concept of psychological safety in university education, its relationship with academic engagement, as well as the main factors influencing the formation of a safe educational environment. Theoretical approaches and empirical studies are analyzed, confirming that a high level of psychological safety contributes to increased academic motivation, responsibility, and participation among students. Special attention is given to the role of the teacher and interpersonal relationships within the group as key conditions for creating a trusting atmosphere.

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1. Introduction

Student engagement largely depends on the quality of the educational environment, especially on the level of its psychological safety. Nowadays, modern higher education in Uzbekistan requires students not only to acquire knowledge but also to actively participate in the learning process. Psychological safety implies a sense of security, support, and the ability to express opinions without fear of negative judgment. A lack of such safety can reduce motivation, cause anxiety and apathy, thereby decreasing academic activity. Engagement includes three components: cognitive (intellectual involvement), emotional (interest, satisfaction), and behavioral (active participation). Its formation is influenced both by personal characteristics and external conditions—teaching style, interpersonal relationships within the group, and the organization of the learning process[1].

The concept of psychological safety has become widespread in occupational psychology but has increasingly been considered in the context of education in recent years. According to several authors, psychological safety in the educational environment is a system of conditions that promote emotional comfort, absence of fear, trust, and openness. This state affects the development of students' sense of belonging and self-confidence[2].

2. Materials and Methods

Psychological safety is a state in which a person feels comfortable, secure, and free from fear, anxiety, or psychological harm within a given environment. It encompasses trust, respect, and open communication, as well as the individual's internal protection

from negative external influences. In the context of an organization, this means that employees can openly express their thoughts and make mistakes without fear of punishment or negative consequences[3].

An analysis of scholars' work on this issue highlights the following key aspects of psychological safety:

1. Absence of psychological violence: there is no place for bullying, discrimination, or other forms of psychological pressure within the group or organization.
2. Trust and openness: people are willing to communicate honestly, share their thoughts, and are not afraid to express opinions even if they differ from the majority.
3. Support and respect: colleagues show understanding, help solve problems, and support each other in difficult situations.
4. Constructive feedback: employees exchange knowledge and experience to help each other grow without fear of judgment.
5. Sense of internal freedom: individuals feel free, unafraid of vulnerability or making mistakes, which allows them to learn and develop[4].

Psychological safety is a state of the educational environment free from manifestations of psychological violence in interactions, fostering the satisfaction of needs for personal and trusting (authentic) communication, creating a referential significance/belonging of the environment (holding), and ensuring the mental health, well-being, progressive development, individuation, and self-realization of the participants involved. Psychological safety in the educational environment is considered a crucial condition that allows the environment to have a developmental character. A psychologically safe environment is one in which the majority of participants show high levels of satisfaction with interaction and protection from psychological violence[5].

It should also be noted that creating and maintaining this reality is possible through purposeful management of the system of relationships among the participants involved: students, parents (representatives of students), teachers, educational institution administrators, and support staff.

At the same time, managing psychological safety implies activities by the institution or organization aimed at:

- Ensuring protection from informational, physical, socio-pedagogical, and psychological influences that could lead to mental and psychological trauma of education subjects, limiting their right to education, work, and communication;
- Creating a special supportive environment (holding) through involving students and university staff in the implementation of various initiatives;
- Developing supportive infrastructure (material and technical base, development spaces and territories, and building effective communication).

3. Results and Discussion

The The most commonly encountered definition in scientific literature is that of I. A. Baeva, who defines psychological safety of the educational environment as a state of the environment free from manifestations of psychological violence in interpersonal interactions, facilitating the satisfaction of basic needs for personal and trusting communication, creating the referential significance of the environment, and consequently ensuring the psychological protection of its participants. According to I. A. Baeva, the educational environment is "a holistic, systemically and synergetically organized space of interaction among participants of the educational process with the socio-cultural and socio-natural environment, allowing the individual's personality to unfold" [6]. This refers to the university environment—creative and constantly developing—where negative influences from participants in the educational process are absent; this is a somewhat narrow understanding of the educational environment.

It should also be noted that psychological safety of the educational environment is a state free from manifestations of psychological violence in interactions, fostering the satisfaction of needs for personal and trusting communication, creating the vital significance of the environment, and ensuring the mental health of its participants. It is described as a "state of consciousness protection," a "subjective feeling of comfort," a "state of mental equilibrium," and an "absence of threat." Here, particular emphasis is placed on subject–subject relationships, which in turn represent the optimal level of psychologically comfortable learning and interaction of students within the university educational process, as well as the student's ability to resist or mitigate potential threats posed by the educational environment. In this context, it makes sense to talk about the psychological safety of the student[7].

Given the importance of the student's role in ensuring their own psychological safety, it is interesting to consider the different positions students may take in relation to the educational environment:

1. The student's presence at the university is practically formal, with minimal "student-university" ties limited only to the academic process; the student's attitude toward the university is, at best, indifferent.
2. The student's relationship to the university environment reflects a consumption situation, using it merely as a service provider.
3. The student interacts with the university environment as a field of activity: they produce new means and forms of organizing activities, participate in organized events, and support traditional forms of activity [8].

It should also be noted that to ensure psychological safety, consulting, engagement, and training of teachers are carried out in the following areas:

- On-the-job training (development of individual, group, and organizational capabilities, cognitive models, and behavior patterns that ensure personal psychological safety and the psychological safety of the university as a whole);
- Training in work methods (activity standards based on health-preserving technologies, advanced teaching tools, management of production and business tasks that contribute to the fullest realization of the personal and professional potential of educational participants);
- Training in intra-organizational relations (standards of normative behavior, building vertical and horizontal communications);
- Development of individual development programs (including individual and group consultations, trainings on identified problematic situations, and bottlenecks in ensuring psychological safety)[9].

Psychological safety, as a necessary condition for the existence and development of individuals and society, is realized through certain forms of social interactions and joint activities. It creates a sense of belonging to specific social groups and structures, provides protection from possible threats, and forms the need for constant connections with the surrounding world and identification with a particular group and social system—this is precisely where the "educational environment" fits in. The educational environment is a psycho-pedagogical reality containing specially organized conditions for personality formation and development, integrated into the social and spatial-object environment. Its psychological essence is the totality of activity-communicative acts and relationships among participants in the educational process [10].

Research shows that under conditions of psychological safety, students are more likely to take initiative, ask questions, and actively participate in discussions. In such an atmosphere, fear of making mistakes decreases, and intrinsic motivation strengthens. Teachers who create a supportive environment contribute not only to the academic success of students but also to their personal growth. During the course of research, it has become evident from a number of scientific works that the teacher plays a key role in creating a

psychologically safe environment. The level of trust and acceptance in the group depends on the teacher's pedagogical style, empathy, and openness. Also important are elements of the learning environment: the presence of feedback, honest and constructive criticism, and respect for the individual characteristics of students[11].

To ensure psychological safety and foster academic engagement among students, some recommendations can be suggested for use in educational activities. In particular:

- Use active learning methods (discussions, project work) that promote openness;
- Provide constructive feedback;
- Create an inclusive atmosphere where everyone's opinion is respected;
- Enhance teachers' pedagogical competence in emotional intelligence and communication.

It should be noted that three empirical criteria mainly define psychological safety in the university educational environment:

1. Subjective attitude toward the educational environment (positive, negative, neutral), measured by a system of scales including behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components;
2. Key characteristics of the educational environment and satisfaction with them, calculated based on the overall assessment of satisfaction with certain characteristics of social interaction within the university environment;
4. Student's protection in the university environment from psychological violence by other participants in the educational process (teachers, peers, university administration) [12].

Experiencing psychological safety at university is one of the most significant factors in forming a "healthy" personality. The category of safety can also serve as an indicator of the university's effectiveness. It becomes important not only to understand the content of the concept of psychological safety in education but also to identify the structural components of psychological safety[13].

The following structural components can be distinguished as components of a safe educational environment:

- Normative-legal components — based on the safety norms of the educational organization, they ensure the protection of personal, public, and professional interests and consider labor protection standards, safety regulations, and sanitary-hygienic requirements for the building and premises (lighting, distribution of academic load during the day, optimal daily routine, etc.);
- Emotional-comfort components — aimed at creating a high level of psychological comfort for all participants in the educational process (teachers, students, university administration);
- Cultural and socially oriented components — ensure mutual understanding and create a sense of belonging to a particular social and cultural group (communication and interaction within the study group);
- "Protective" components — take into account individual and age characteristics of objects and subjects of the educational environment;
- Cognitive-creative and developmental components — aimed at unlocking creative potential through organizing a safe environment;
- Process-technological components — related to the organization of classes and extracurricular activities that form the behavior algorithm of participants in the educational process [14].

It should be noted that the educational situation is an artificially created situation of functional inequality, in which the content of educational activities places high demands on the level of personal and cognitive development of students:

- The shift of emphasis to independent work (distance learning, educational platforms like Moodle, etc.) Requires a high level of self-organization and mastery of productive cognitive strategies;
- A focus on creativity and research activities assumes cognitive autonomy, the ability to act in situations of uncertainty and the absence of activity and thinking algorithms;
- The development of a subject position in education is associated with a conscious and responsible attitude towards the means of educational activity, the ability to set goals and construct an adequate predictive model of this activity [15].

The university educational environment represents a "platform" for human development. At the same time, it should be noted that the question of organizing a safe environment among university students remains open today. An analysis of available data shows that a psychologically safe educational environment reveals the unpreparedness of a significant portion of students to meet the rather high demands placed on them by the modern university. Analysis of scientific and informational sources allows us to conclude that important conditions contributing to students' psychological safety may be their resilience to emotional imbalance arising in the educational environment and their conscious, active involvement in the educational process.

Sustainable development of the subject of the educational process implies the ability (capacity) for “self-restoration.” At the same time, a person is capable of self-restoration, development, and interaction with the social environment only independently.

4. Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that a psychologically safe educational environment at the university is aimed at satisfying and developing the socially oriented needs of the student, preserving and enhancing their self-esteem, and fully ensuring and revealing the personality’s potential.

All the above characteristics and structural components of psychological safety in the educational environment of the university allow us to identify criteria for psychological safety in the educational environment:

- Academic anxiety among students (academic stress, exam stress, test anxiety);
- Student activity during their studies at the university;
- Conscious subject position of the student;
- Intrinsic motivation;
- Educational attitudes of the subjects of the educational environment;
- Motivation to achieve success;
- Student involvement (engagement) in the educational process;
- Absence of emotional burnout among students;
- Academic resilience.

The main indicators of psychological safety in the educational environment may include:

- Low levels of psychological violence, determined by the predominance of destructive forms of psychological influence used by teachers, such as coercion or destructive criticism;
- Predominance of dialogic orientation among communication participants;
- Positive attitude towards the main parameters of the educational environment among all its participants (students, teachers, etc.);
- High level of satisfaction with the organization of the educational environment.

Summarizing the above facts, it should be noted that psychological safety in the university educational environment is a complex, multifactorial construct that includes: the state of the educational environment free from manifestations of psychological violence in interactions. Psychological safety in the educational environment also contributes to satisfying the needs for personally-trustful communication, creating the

vital significance of this environment, and ensuring the mental health of its participants. It is aimed at satisfying and developing the socially oriented needs of the student, preserving and enhancing their self-esteem, and fully ensuring and revealing the potential of the individual.

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