Konteksty Pedagogiczne 2(7)/2016, s. 27–37
doi: 10.19265/KP.2016.02727

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Contemplations on why primary schoolchildren fail and how to help them prevent study failure

Introduction

During our life we encounter different people and establish various forms of relationship with them. We buy from some and sell to others; play with some and fight with others. We know people as friends, relatives, policemen, to name but a few. One person is our doctor, another – an uncle, a teacher, wife, father, daughter. Some of these relationships are formal, structured, definite; others are loose, ill-defined, spontaneous. Some are superficial and thin, others involve our deepest feelings.[1] It has been generally agreed that there exists an urgent need for thorough investigation and explanation of these relationships since they play a significant role in overall child development and the excellence in study in particular. Another point of view stresses the interdependence of a person's emotional intelligence on the parent-child various types of relationships as they took place in early childhood. Defined almost as a testing ground for our personal adjustment, the marital relationship has become another major area of study.

What is more, if we say that a student–teacher relationship has been carefully studied, we'll allude ourselves, leaving unsolved many neglected so far problems which carry out quite clear-cut importance for the general welfare of our society of today as well as that of tomorrow. What should be in focus of the scientific thought attention is the issue of influence that teachers have on students and vice versa. Among a huge array of articles on the peculiarities

[1] J. Holt, *How Children Fail: Classics in Child Development*, New York 1982, p. 11.

of learning and effective methods and techniques of teaching, there are no answers to many questions concerning the emotional condition of pupils experiencing the fear of failure in front of the class.

No one seems to be able to answer the questions of both surface and depth behaviour expressions of a child when he/she hears his/her name called by the teacher. The same can be mentioned about a teacher: what we know is just what should be or how the study and teaching process should develop. However, we don't know what really happens. We don't know the answers to such questions: What is the emotional condition of a child answering the teacher's question? Does he/she feel the significance of a particular portion of information for him/her personally or he/she studies for the mere sake of a "must" ordered by parents? Does a child feel being given enough attention by the teacher? What attitude does the teacher show in relation to the subject and the topic covered as being discussed by his pupils? Is the teacher concerned only with the accuracy of the information reproduction or more with the child's success? Does the pupil-teacher relationship contribute to the pupil's emotional and intellectual growth? How is it possible for a teacher to foster and support the intelligences his pupils possess? What should he do to prevent his pupil's failure? In answer these and other possible questions we assume that a teacher (not his pupils) due to professional education and pedagogical mastery and experience should try to find appropriate paths on the way to understanding those he is teaching for the general success of educational procedures. It is the task of scientists and methodologists to show him how to do it.

The goal of this article is to analyze the issues that stand behind the child's failure in school so that to create an appropriate philosophy of teaching to help modern school to facilitate children in their educational endeavours.

Teachers should make some effort in trying to see their pupils as individuals, not merely the objects of their teaching activity. To help them do this, it is necessary to profoundly study a pupil's activity in class and show it to the teacher in every possible detail, together with the analysis and interpretation of his/her actions and behaviour. In such careful examination there might be found the answers to questions on how pupils study and why they fail.

Literature review

There exists an idea that it's always difficult to psychologically overcome failure in a success-oriented culture.[2] It's inevitable for anybody who does something to fail since failing is a typical behavioral feature of any adult as well as any child for the common belief suggests that there aren't flawless people. But the question is how often is failing considered to be within the norm? Or in which areas are failures considered to be less significant in the overall course of learning. The teaching process presupposes the development of abstracting skills, curiosity in schoolchildren though by failing at school the students seem not to meet the teachers' expectations in learning. To minimize the gap between the set goals and expectations and the real outcomes and achievements is possible in case of taking a look at what psychological processes take place in the pupil's mind at the moment of failure. Although very often it isn't easy to do.

The scientists believe that most children in school fail because of the pressure that is put on them by teachers and parents, which is expressed by the marks that they get for their achievement. Moreover, no matter what the marks are the schoolchildren are supposed to complete the school curriculum. So some schoolchildren know that they will graduate from school anyway, even if they have acquired or achieved very little.[3]

But the problem that should be really alarming is that many schoolchildren fail to realize that there is more behind learning than just getting a mark to satisfy parents or teachers, leave school and forget about the study. They actually fail to acquire the very capacity of learning, which is capable of developing their intelligence which, in its turn should be helpful in developing significant life-relevant competences; they fail to understand that they were born with such capacity, as well as creativity which had been shaping them as personalities during the first years of their life before they eventually got into school. There must be the answer to the question why they fail.

Some authors consider that the cause of failure lies in fear, boredom and confusion.[4] The *fear* is related to the demands of adults who do believe in

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[2] S. Eccles, A. Wigfield, U. Schiefele, *Motivation to succeed*, [in:] *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. 3, ed. N. Eisenberg, 5th ed., New York 1998, p. 1017.

[3] J. Holt, *How Children Fail*…, p. 15.

[4] M.E. Seligman, K. Reivich, L. Jaycox, J. Gillham, *The optimistic child*, New York 1995, p. 98.

their children as flawless creatures and pose a tremendous study burden over the shoulders and heads of schoolchildren. The *boredom* is related to the commonplace and dull character of the information and learning material that is suggested for children to study at school. As well as this, the potential capabilities of a child's mind, his/her creativity are very seldom engaged in the lessons at school. On the contrary, the students are fixed or limited within the standards set by people who know very little of what these standards should be or whether they are necessary to be posed at all. This leads to partial if not total loss of the sense of creativity to be implemented by a schoolchild. The *confusion* is related to thousands of inaccuracies and misunderstandings that arise in the lessons because of the poor performance and the lack of pedagogical and subject competences of the teachers. Moreover, schoolchildren rarely make connections with what they already know about the reality and the world around them and what they are told at school.

Measures to be taken

Before the obstacles in teaching are overcome, it is of great importance to understand why children fail even if they make efforts to do their best in the study, and why they can't make use of their inherited intelligences and develop them to the fullest.

John Holt claims that people have very imperfect control over their attention.[5] It is not surprising at all as the recent experimental findings suggest that specially trained army soldiers can hold their attention for not more than 20 seconds. It shouldn't be mentioned that schoolchildren are not soldiers and aren't trained in holding their attention for 45 minutes (the duration of a lesson). Thus, the teachers should foster the students' attention by varying the study process and letting them know about such peculiarities of their attention. Another important issue in attention capability is understanding: the attention is preserved for a longer period if a person understands the information that is being processed. So when at some point a student makes a confession of not understanding something, this should not be treated as a failure but as conscious control over his/her study, and at this point such student must be given extra help in holding his/her attention by turning the "non-un-

[5] J. Holt, *How Children Fail…*, p. 28.

derstood" elements into the "understood" ones. Thus, there should be a turn in teaching practice from asking the students what they know and putting marks for that, but rather asking them what they don't know or don't understand, helping them to make a difference between what they know and what they don't, and then work on the part they don't know or don't understand.

C. Ames gives a very precise comparison of a teacher with a man in the woods,[6] claiming that when the teacher calls on a student and projects his teaching activities onto him/her, then such student is active and reacts to the teacher's instructions, thus pretending to be studying. Otherwise, the student would behave totally differently when not being under the centre of teacher's attention, doing whatever he/she is up to at that particular moment in the lesson. This idea, as it seems, turns a teacher into a tamer or a guard rather than an educator. To enhance their teaching impact on the students, the teachers should focus more on the teaching itself, but not on keeping the order and discipline in class. If the lesson is challenging for the students, they will be engaged in facing the challenge and achieving success rather than doing something they aren't supposed to do in class.

N. Tollefson solves the question of why the lessons look boring to the majority of schoolchildren.[7] The answer suggests that this happens because of short-term goals being set before students. These goals do not project a clear picture of the sensible reasons for their efforts in learning. The students don't see practical application of what they learn at school. They just do the tasks set by teachers; they don't feel personal engagement in the task completion. Thus, going to school turns into some kind of a "must" of doing the daily tasks of a teacher without realizing the necessity of those tasks and their relevance for the future activity of students when they grow up. As a result, all the students care about is the need to complete the task no matter what the price is. If they can't do that in the prescribed legal manner, they seek the possible ways of cheating the teachers and themselves just to do what they believe they go to school for. In contrast, good teachers think much more ahead. For instance, the history lessons will inject interest into the study if a student sees that historical knowledge is important for understanding the present day course of

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6 C.A. Ames, *Motivation: What teachers need to know*, "Teachers College Record" 1990, vol. 91, no. 3, p. 412.

7 N. Tollefson, *Classroom applications of cognitive theories of motivation*, "Educational Psychology Review" 2000, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 68.

events, knowing how to prevent social hardships by learning the lessons of the past and putting them into good use rather than just memorizing the dates of historical events and store them in memory to later forget forever. Mathematics lessons, too, can be interesting if they develop the logical thinking of the students, but not focus on precision of mathematical sums.

In order to help the students realize the real application of school and find a broader answer to the question why they need to study the teachers should encourage the students to ask questions. Furthermore, the students should clearly know that they will not be punished for the "wrong answers" or "stupid/wrong questions", for there aren't "right" or "wrong" questions and answers.

The significance of encouragement

Speaking of encouragement it is important to clarify what the teachers have to encourage their students to. There is a strong belief that encouragement means convincing the students to reach success. Here we are to present what does it mean to succeed from the child's point of view. Psychologists claim that success usually creates the thought of possibility of failure, and preventing this failure by putting some effort into an activity and overcoming the hardships on the way to reaching the goal. In this way, a person sees the whole process of succeeding.

Another idea worth mentioning is the one of making mistakes. It's like seeing "what if I do this like this." Even if "this way of doing something" is seen as not the one that was sought for, there arises a feeling of relief,[8] because the person in this situation has gained some start-off experience which will now be compared with the other possible ways of accomplishing the task and the right answer will be easier to reach. Thus, when making a mistake is severely punished by a teacher a child then is under constant great pressure and tension/stress of doing the "wrong thing," providing "the wrong answer," and is deprived of gaining crucially important experience in learning. As such, a mistake here should not be treated as a failure, and making a mistake should not be treated as a failure to succeed.

P. Yough warns the teachers of the danger of putting the schoolchildren under too much stress and tension which, according to the scientist, might push the students into the need of cheating or losing interest in studying

[8] J. Holt, *How Children Fail*…, p. 64.

and thus averting their attention from what is being learned or practiced.[9] It has been proved that worrying or tension does not add up to the success of any learning process. For instance, Stephen Krashen, an expert in the field of linguistics from the University of Southern California, who specializes in theories of language acquisition and development, claims that there is a special Affective Filter which, under the condition of stress or tension, prevents a second language learner from acquiring the second language in the natural like manner, and thus turns this process into a total failure.[10] On the contrary, free from worrying brain can be involved into efficient activity and use its capacities to a great extent. At this point, it's possible to speak of triggering a person's intelligence, which doesn't stress a child but uses the brain for the process of thinking and solving problems.

The essence of intelligence

Although there has been a long and extensive research and debate, there is still no common or unique definition of intelligence in scientific papers. This has triggered a thought that intelligence may be approximately described, but cannot be defined to the fullest essence of this term.

By intelligence the scientists imply the type of behaviour in a number of situations, which may not be characterized as the typical ones, but totally unfamiliar. This behaviour is then a certain indicator of how the brain works in seeking the answers to the questions a person doesn't know how to solve rather than the answers to the questions they are comfortable with.[11]

The term intelligence is not used merely to label the differences we see in the behavioural skills of any person to differentiate him/her from the other individuals. The term is used to explain why there are variations. The schoolchild's "explanation" of why he performs relatively poor in school as compared to his classmates also connected with the claim that his friend is more intelligent. The parents are happy to accept this explanation as well. The concept is believed to be part of the commonly understood phenomenon. As

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[9] P. Yough, *How children succeed: grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*, New York 2012, p. 44.

[10] S.D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, New York 1988, p. 67.

[11] *Stages of Acceptance of a Learning Disability: The Impact of Labeling*, "Learning Disability Quarterly" 2000, vol. 2, no. 1, 46.

another example, the teachers also believe that discrepancies in their students' performances appear because of their inherited intelligences – some pupils are fortunate to possess them and some not. Education in general accepts the concept, and the major effort is to discover the child's personal quality of intelligence. As soon as this has been discovered through testing, the children are then grouped into streams and given training appropriate to their supposed tested intelligence. The child is considered to possess this low-level personal, inherited, and static or non-changed intelligence, and as a consequence is grouped with other low-level schoolchildren.

At the same time J. Holt believes that every child is born with a certain capacity and potential for intelligence development.[12] This assumption can be explained by the speed small babies learn the world during the first three or four years of their lives. If we look at how much any adult learns for three years, this is nothing in comparison to the huge bulk of information and knowledge the infants get for the same period of time. But somehow, as children get older, and then start going to school their capacity to learn and develop intellectually decreases tremendously.

Looking at the process of an infant baby development, it's possible to notice that a child isn't afraid to try, to experiment. When the baby falls down making the first steps in learning to walk he/she is then carefully encouraged by his/her parents to try again in spite of a mistake, in spite of his/her numerous failures. At school, the students are not given a second chance to try because of the pressure of the syllabus, because of the need to learn more information instead of making them learn less information but more efficiently, learning the principles of how different phenomena exist, influence each other, react to certain stimuli, etc.

As a result, the adults (teachers or parents) destroy a child's capacity to create his/her individual style of learning, develop his/her intelligence, destroy a child's creativity overall. The school, in its turn, makes the students afraid of making mistakes, of experimenting, of failing for the sake of further success. Deprived of all these things, a child appears in a dull and confusing schooling which demands to complete the tasks precisely, in a robot-like manner, cover a certain limited school syllabus and then graduate from school leaving nothing but bad and frightening memories of the whole process of study. This experience is then passed from parents to their children and then further to

[12] J. Holt, *How Children Fail…*, p. 207.

their children, marking the school years as some kind of imprisonment of schoolchildren for 9 or 11 years.

What really happens in schools can be expressed in the following conceptual issues:

- the school insists that no matter what the present day demands, there exists a certain bulk of human knowledge classified by "somebody" (from the Ministry of Education) as essential, that's why necessary for any person to know, and thus, this bulk should be taught at school;
- the success in life of a school graduate is measured by how much of that bulk (spoken about above) he/she is tested to know;
- the primary task of school is to try to store as much knowledge form the bulk as possible into the mind of students, which is seen as the preparation of young adults to successful future professional activity.

So the overall picture of school has been profoundly depicted: the schoolchildren are packed with some kind of knowledge, being unaware of the necessity to learn it, not being asked whether it's interesting for them to learn it, not being explained why they must learn it, not being given any sensible reason of why they need it for their future.

Conclusions

Although a great number of scientists and education professionals understand how nonsense and absurd the mentioned above ideas sound, the school practice of the XXI century continues to be absolutely unchanged and similar to the one applied in the XVII or XVIII centuries, enlarging the gap between what kind of students are at a present day school together with what kind of education they need and what kind of education they are exposed to. The outcomes of such schooling process are non-surprising and quite inevitable. To inject changes into the whole educational process, we should create the schools where the desire for learning goes from a student but not as a "must" imposed by adults, where a child can reveal and develop his/her intelligences, talents and creativity, but not conceal, destroy, pervert or kill them forever. The active, engaging, self-pleasing learning makes a child remember what he/she learns and use it once it has been learnt; on the contrary, passive, compelling, demanded and restricted learning to

please somebody else makes a child forget what he/she learns as soon as this "somebody else" (but not the learner himself) has been pleased. This is the explanation why schoolchildren forget most of what they have learned while getting prepared for the exam. As soon as they get a mark for their performance at the exam, they erase the information to provide space in their brain for another portion of the information they need to learn to please "another somebody else" – another teacher.

There should also be found a compromise idea of the curriculum/syllabus validity. It is quite inevitable to realize now that the knowledge is not static – new theories explode the truth of the previous ones, thus what we learn today might be denied tomorrow. As a conclusion, the education professional should devise new ways of how to teach students to understand this changeability of knowledge and try to go ahead of time in their development rather than make them remember mere facts as bits and pieces of irrelevant information which means simply enhancing their memory capacity.

The desire to learn the students are born with should be fostered at school. It will later prove schoolchildren with the ability to study non-stop during life, use their intelligences to develop the necessary life and professional activity competences, develop their creativity and thus ensure success in any personal and occupational endeavours.

Modern schools should be the places for the children to satisfy their curiosity, to reveal their interests and talents, develop their non-standard abilities and intelligences, the places where failure is considered a normal stepping stone on the way to stable and ongoing success, where development is a more important notion than knowledge volume prescribed by the curriculum.

We personally believe that there are lots of creative teachers but their wisdom has been obliterated by the flood of 'expert' advice delivered by those with little experience of the reality of classroom practice. There seems little understanding that every classroom comes with a dynamic range of very different individuals. Teaching that respects and celebrates the thinking and reality of a diversity of students is the ultimate act of creativity – creativity that is easily dulled by both school and Ministry compliance requirements.

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Przyczyny niepowodzeń szkolnych dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym oraz sposoby ich zapobiegania

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje przyczyny niepowodzeń szkolnych. Autorka przedstawia analizę porównawczą dwóch typów szkół. Z jednej strony charakteryzuje szkołę, która nie motywuje dziecka do nauki, z drugiej – szkołę budzącą w uczniach ciekawość poznawczą oraz zachęcającą do nauki.

Słowa kluczowe: niepowodzenie, sukces, ciekawość, kreatywność, zdolności, uczenie i nauczanie

Contemplations on why primary schoolchildren fail and how to help them prevent study failure

Summary: The present study aims to analyse possible reasons of failure among primary school children. The author presents a comparative study of two types of schools. She presents a school which does not motivate its students to learn as well as the one that promotes curiosity and desire to learn among its learners.

Keywords: failure, success, curiosity, creativity, capability, learning and teaching