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The importance of positive teacher-student relationship in enhancing the social competences of children isolated from their peers

Introduction

Entering into a peer group and establishing good relationships with others is one of the primary developmental tasks of childhood (Stefańska-Klar, 2004). Obuchowski (1983) notes that satisfying the need for emotional contact in a peer group is of great importance for personal development of a child as belonging to a group allows it to meet important needs of affinity, recognition, prestige and achievement. While learning at school, every child also learns the interests of his peers, their needs, the world of values, talents, behaviour in different situations, and is able to build its own personality in relation to the social world (Polak, 2010). At school the student's social activity increases, involving active initiation and participation in social situations. The child becomes the source of changes occurring as a result of interaction with peers. However, not all children are able to establish successful relationships with others. Sometimes, some of them start relationships that do not encourage their development, and also often these relationships might be disadvantageous for their peers. This applies to children systematically rejected or harassed by peers, which is around five to ten percent of the school population (Boivin, 2005). Tremblay et al. (1992) point out that regardless of socio-demographic differences and the way in which maladjustment is

defined, in a normal population ten to twelve percent of children have serious behavioural problems and are rejected by their peers. Schaffer (2006) believes that peer rejection should be treated as a warning signal for possible future social maladjustment and that the teacher has a significant role in the process of eliminating or reducing the intensity of occurrence of this phenomenon. Consequently, positive relationship between teacher and student can be a source of gratifying experience (Deptuła, 2013).

1. Improper development of child's social competences as a determinant of peer isolation

We may assume that the mechanisms of peer isolation are determined not only by the traits of the individual who becomes the object of the action as a consequence of the marginalizing, but also the traits of the group. Isolation of some people is in some way included in the group's development cycle, in the processes underway in it, is a natural phenomenon, and often even conducive to its interests, though always negative in consequence for marginalized or discriminated people. Therefore, while discussing the topic of peer exclusion, we mostly focus on a group that is not just a context but a very important part of this process. Isolation from the group leads, in the first place, to strong and negative emotions – sadness, loneliness, feelings of injustice, guilt, jealousy, social anxiety. Experiencing these emotions not only results in a change in the quality of life, but also in lowering self-esteem and social withdrawal. The huge number of definitions of peer isolation leads to a search for synthesis and generalization. We can simply define them as a phenomenon of depriving people from satisfying psychosocial needs and fulfilling developmental tasks. The cause of this phenomenon can be seen in a broadly defined properties of an isolated person (knowledge and skills, personality traits, attitudes and values), the specificity of the environment in which he or she functions, and finally in mechanisms of interpersonal relationships (Jaskulska & Poleszak, 2015).

Isolation or exclusion does not come immediately – it is a process progressing from inclusion to exclusion, from full acceptance to rejection. Reviewing the definition of the word isolation we could assume that this process is:
- dynamic and multidimensional, is often a cumulative phenomenon, leading to multi-dimensional deprivation;
- can be recognized by the lack or insufficient level of participation in the mainstream of peer group or community life;

– may result in breaking peer, family, social relationships' bonds; losing the meaning of life and disturbances in the building of personal and social identity;
– it brings possible risk of duplication of behaviour patterns and the transfer of certain mechanisms of adaptation to further stages of life and development (Gaś, 2006).

The exclusion from the peer group consists of many intermediary factors. Gaś (2006), assumes that the exclusion process consists of three elements (Figure 1):
– actions excluding members of a group or community;
– personal characteristics of excluded entities;
– personal reactions of people excluded to experiencing a sense of exclusion.

Personal reaction to the sense of exclusion ⟶ Actions excluding group members
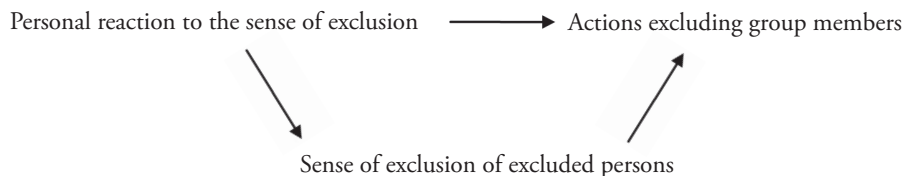
Sense of exclusion of excluded persons

Figure 1.
Exclusion process (adapted from Jaskulska & Poleszak, 2015).

The causes of peer rejection can also be seen, for example, in the improper children's development of social competence. Competence defined as the ability to solve work and private life problems can significantly affect the social image of a human being (Konopczyński, 2006). In the field of pedagogy, competence is the basic principle of upbringing – in this perspective it is understood as the ability for personal self-realization, as a result of the learning process (Okoń, 1996). A broader pedagogical definition of the term *competence* was introduced by Czerepaniak-Walczak (1995). According to her, *competence* is a particular feature expressed in the demonstration at the level set by the social standards, the skills of adequate behaviour, the awareness of the need and the consequences of such behaviour and accepting responsibility for them. This tendency is achieved by learning perceived by human, observable by others and repeated (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1995). According to the definition of social usefulness, "social skills define behaviour in different situations, helping to achieve socially relevant goals" (Gresham & Elliott, 1987).

According to McFall (1982) social competence can be defined as the ability of a particular person to assess the fulfilment of a social task, and social competence is the real ability to perform this task in a competent (satisfactory) way. Green and Rechis (2008) state that collaborative competence is a fundamental component of social behaviour, and that this skill is supposed to be key to good peer relationships. Additionally, helping others as well as understanding their feelings or peer problem solving are a permanent determinant of the position of popularity, regardless of the child's gender and social context. One of the most important mechanisms for the development of social competence is learning from the accumulation of experiences coming from real relationships with others, first by observing the behaviour of adults and peers in social interaction situations, by taking joint action and then by emotional interacting and identifying with the partners of the interaction, as well as social categorization, accompanied by the development of self-awareness (Deptuła, 2013). According to Stefańska-Klar (2004), Vygotsky believes that entering into bilateral relations with others is an essential principle for the development of every social function, they are the stimulators of emotional, cognitive, social and moral development, as well as skills related to the executive sphere. Thus, it can be concluded that the child's ability to master these social skills can be a key element in eliminating the phenomenon of peer dismissal among children. At the same time an important role in the development of children's social competences is also played by the teacher.

2. The importance of the relationship between teacher and student in strengthening social competences

The mechanism of the social teacher's influence on the child is based on the fact that the interaction with him/her has a gratifying character. At the initial stage teacher is the person who provides the sense of security. In the new school situation teacher is the only adult that can fulfil many different needs of a child, even the most basic ones, such as the need for closeness, comfort, information, acceptance of achievements, encouragement after failure, or empowerment in relationships with his peers.

Werner and Smith (1989) in their longitudinal study, show that the most common positive pattern in the lives of resistant children is, apart from the family, a favourite teacher who is not only a school-based instructor for them, but also a trustee and positive role model whom they can identify with.

Moreover, the caring relationship with the teacher gives young people the motivation to succeed (Werner & Smith, 1989). The role of teachers is crucial in the opinion of children, and their relationships with students have a significant impact on the processes taking place in the classroom. It has also been discovered that relationship with teachers is related to students' social competences, general attitudes toward school, participation in problematic behaviour, and student attitudes towards teaching methods (Noam & Fiore, 2004). Similarly, some other research have concluded that positive relations between students and teachers limit problematic behaviour in the classroom while at the same time increasing the level of social competence of students (Birch & Ladd, 1996). Klem and Connel's research reveals the relationship between teacher support and commitment and learning outcomes for primary school students. Students who perceive teachers as caring, those who provide a well-organized learning environment with high, but fair expectations, more often report being involved in school and experiencing less educational problems (Klem & Connel, 2004). The child at the initial stage of school education is dependent on the teacher and perceives him as a person whose behaviour is a direct and immediate source of reward and punishment for him, which prompts them to subordinate and assimilate the behaviour in accordance with the teacher's expectations. It seems to be worth mentioning here that these expectations are often only imagined by the child, subjectively anticipated from previously heard siblings or parents opinions, but they stimulate the child's behaviour in some specific school situations. The child is trying to meet the expectations of the teacher, expecting a variety of attractive gratification, treating himself as a person performing a new, important role – the role of a student (Sowińska, 2011). In every school environment, there are some differences in the style of teacher-child relationship. In some schools, teachers are more likely to behave in an inconsistent manner, first increasing their distance from children and next overly limiting that distance. Therefore, the child does not feel safe in these situations, as he is confused about the teacher's expectations and his rights. As a consequence, the child is not focusing on the task, building hypotheses and finding creative solutions, as well as on their personal resources and experiences, but on guessing what the teacher is expecting from him right now. The child learns submissiveness instead of the active and autonomous planning and organizing his or her life and building a sense of own identity. Referring to Baumrind's (1973) research, the social competences of ten-year-olds living in a family with authoritative parenting

style, characterized by firmness combined with benevolence, were significantly higher than children of authoritarian lenient, or careless parents. Thus, the inconsistent style of work and the way of referring to children does not help to make personal and warm relationships with children (Wiliński, 2005). At the early stage of education, authoritative behaviour combined with simultaneous expressive kindness and willingness to help lead to recognition of the adult as the authority and willingness to maintain positive relations with him. The nature of the teacher-child relationship has a great impact on his or her self-esteem and self-confidence, which, on the other hand, is a source of motivation, aspirations, desires, as well as a base for self-efficacy and belief in one's own ability to achieve meaningful goals for the child (Sowińska, 2011). Bee (2008) highlights that in the late childhood, self-awareness develops as the child begins to see not only its own external traits, but also personality traits. It also perceives and understands the differentiation of these traits in itself and among peers and learns to accept them. This is certainly related to the development of different thinking functions, however, the decisive factor in the stage of self-esteem development and the way of seeing oneself is the feeling of support from the important others like parents, teachers and peers (Bee, 2008). The teacher is particularly important in this moment, as his behaviour is the source of information both for the child and also for its parents, who want to know how their child copes with a new role of a student. If the teacher focuses mostly on child's mistakes and failures, does not respond to his or her progress and behaviour in various areas of school life, not only in education, if he is restrictive and does not care about relation between him and the child, then the child does not receive adequate feedback that could be helpful while building self-esteem, based on the sense of justice and raising his faith in the possibility of self-realization.

Conclusion

The relationship between the teacher and the student affects the quality of the child's experiences (Bee, 2008). The way the teacher talks to the child, how he perceives it, how he signals his perceptions and whether he allows the student to be authentic and independent can have a substantial influence on the classroom climate and the way children relate to each other. A teacher who behaves kindly towards children, focuses on their needs, accepts their different views, gives them the right to develop their individuality, does not

show impatience or aggression, provides positive behavioural patterns to his students. The way of referring to students has an impact on shaping the classroom atmosphere of either competition or cooperation, reflected directly in students' behaviour. Everything that child experiences at school is fundamental for the development of its social skills and the ability to function in a peer group (Bee, 2008). These first experiences in a class are also a source of information of how other children see him, what his position in a peer group is, and how others assess his personal and performance competences. The child starts to judge itself as a member of the group. Therefore, positive relationships at the teacher-student level are significant in the prevention of peer isolation in the classroom.

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Summary: In the proper process of child development, shaping individual traits of his or her personality and developing social competence, an important role is played by the child's family as well as by the school environment, which determines its development through educational and pedagogical activities. Children rejected and isolated do not take an active part in the class life. That is the reason why they do not have a chance to meet security and acceptance needs, which are essential for proper social and emotional development. The purpose of this article is to show the importance of proper relationship at the teacher-student level that enhances the development of social competences of children isolated from their peers.

Keywords: peer isolation, teacher–student relationship, social competences

Znaczenie pozytywnych relacji nauczyciel–uczeń w podnoszeniu społecznych kompetencji dzieci izolowanych rówieśniczo

Streszczenie: W prawidłowym przebiegu rozwoju dziecka, kształtowaniu poszczególnych cech jego osobowości oraz rozwijaniu kompetencji społecznych doniosłą rolę odgrywa rodzina dziecka, a w drugiej kolejności środowisko szkolne, które dzięki swojej działalności dydaktyczno-wychowawczej determinuje jego rozwój. Dzieci odrzucone i izolowane nie biorą aktywnego udziału w życiu klasy. Nie mają więc warunków do zaspokajania potrzeby bezpieczeństwa i akceptacji, bardzo potrzebnych do prawidłowego rozwoju społecznego i emocjonalnego. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie znaczenia właściwych relacji na płaszczyźnie nauczyciel–uczeń dla wzmacniania rozwoju kompetencji społecznych dzieci izolowanych rówieśniczo.

Słowa kluczowe: izolacja rówieśnicza, relacja nauczyciel–uczeń, kompetencje społeczne