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Ewa Jędrzejowska

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0669-152X
University of Opole
ejedrzej@uni.opole.pl

SOCIAL SELF-RELIANCE OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

SAMODZIELNOŚĆ SPOŁECZNA DZIECI W WIEKU PRZEDSZKOLNYM

Keywords:
self-reliance,
social self-reliance,
preschool child,
preschool education

Summary: Apart from practical and mental autonomy, the social self-reliance of preschool children constitutes an important aspect of an individual's attaining independence and school maturity. According to the author, contemporary children sometimes present an insufficient level of social self-reliance, which may hinder them from taking actions and implementing future life roles, especially that of a student, as well as from developing independence and a sense of success. In consequence, this may contribute to lower self-esteem and difficulties in the social functioning of the child. The author supplements theoretical considerations with the results of her own research conducted in preschool education institutions in the Opole region in 2018. An analysis of 530 questionnaires from the observation of five and six-year-old children indicated that most of them attained social self-reliance in the studied areas. There were, however, also children who scored low or very low in the area and who require particular support on their way towards self-reliance. The children had the best results in their engagement and perseverance while performing jobs for others, and the poorest – in the sphere of taking decisions or co-deciding.

Słowa kluczowe:

samodzielność,
samodzielność
społeczna,
dziecko w wieku
przedszkolnym,
edukacja
przedszkolna

Streszczenie: Samodzielność społeczna dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym obok samodzielności praktycznej i umysłowej jest ważnym aspektem w osiąganiu niezależności jednostki oraz jej dojrzałości szkolnej. Zdaniem autorki współczesne dzieci reprezentują czasami niewystarczający poziom samodzielności społecznej, co może utrudniać im podejmowanie działań i realizację przyszłych ról życiowych, z podkreśleniem roli ucznia, a także rozwój niezależności i poczucia sukcesu, przyczyniając się do słabszej samooceny i trudności w społecznym funkcjonowaniu dziecka. Rozważania teoretyczne autorka uzupełniła wynikami badań własnych przeprowadzonych w 2018 roku w placówkach wychowania przedszkolnego na terenie Opolszczyzny. Analiza 530 arkuszy obserwacji dzieci 5- i 6-letnich dowiodła, że większość dzieci 5- i 6-letnich osiągnęło samodzielność społeczną w badanych obszarach. Są jednak i takie, które oceniono nisko lub bardzo nisko. Te dzieci należy szczególnie wspierać w ich drodze do samodzielności. Najlepiej wypadły w ocenie zaangażowania i wytrwałości podczas wykonywania prac dla innych, najsłabiej w ocenie umiejętności w zakresie podejmowania decyzji lub współdecydowania.

Children are exactly what we let them become.

(Waloszek, 2006, p. 53)

Introduction

In the pedagogical discourse on education nowadays, what is perceived and emphasized as necessary and desirable, and not merely a hollow declaration, is a change in our thinking about the student, teacher and school in general. According to the theory of constructivism, today a child should be commonly seen as a scientist, constructor and creator, whereas an adult should not only accept this, but also create appropriate conditions. Many scholars believe (inter alia, J. Bruner, H.R. Schaffer, D. Waloszek or D. Klus-Stańska) that preschool or school teachers should strive towards the development of children's self-reliance, support their creativity, encourage discussion, appreciate a different point of view and create a climate favoring such actions and attitudes. Is this kind of thinking about children commonplace and visible in the real world, or does it, perhaps, still remain a mere declaration?

In my opinion, an affirmative answer to the second question is more likely, since, following A. Olczak, “we are not going to develop the self-reliance, originality, creativity or courage of students in a traditionally-oriented school – with the superior role of the infallible teacher, the curriculum to be completed and schoolbook to be taught” (2010, p. 195). Unfortunately, such an image of school is not yet part of the past. What is worse, the traditional approach to the role of the teacher (as a person transferring knowledge, nearly infallible, put on the pedestal or at least behind a desk creating a barrier from the students) still seems to be the dominating one. Similarly, the image of the child/student remains to be that of a person who is immature and weak, requiring and expecting help from adults, a person who needs explanations and knowledge readily submitted. According to D. Waloszek, “we are convinced about the mission of teaching them [children] all, because somewhat subconsciously there is in us the archetype of a guardian” (2006, p. 54). A. Olczak demonstrated that future teachers of small children present a similar image of their pupils. Only less than 13% of the students she asked described a pupil in the categories of scientist-constructor-explorer. Other respondents evoked the image of a child as a *tabula rasa* (someone defenseless, helpless, someone to be taught and brought up by the adult, writing subsequent life cards) or as a natural, spontaneous, “noble savage” (2010, pp. 196–197). Such an attitude, which D. Waloszek refers to as “child management” (2006, p. 8), impedes structuring education that aims at developing the activity and self-reliance of children. According to A. Olczak, this will not change “unless the manner of perceiving the child changes in Polish society” (2010, p. 199) from an attitude dominated by infantilism to a more democratic one, in which we trust the child and his or her curiosity to learn about the world and construct knowledge about it.

According to A. Olczak, an important prerequisite for considerations about the social self-reliance of children is the impoverishment of social relations so visible in the world nowadays. Their development is one of the main aims of early education. More self-reliance of the child in all its spheres creates an opportunity for more developed abilities to cooperate with others, build good social relations, make decisions and share responsibility for actions undertaken together. The aim of this article is to attempt a theoretical and empirical approach to looking at the self-reliance of preschool children, emphasizing its social aspect.

The essence and development of social self-reliance of the child

Social self-reliance is an important constituent of what is widely understood to be self-reliance of the child. Self-reliance is defined in different ways in the literature – it is mainly referred to in terms of independence, being able to cope with problems without the help of others, not being subjected to anybody's power or being able to manage on one's own (Dubisz, 2003, p. 1135). In many definitions of self-reliance, the factor related to social competence is emphasized. Therefore, according to K. Kuszak, self-reliance means primarily obtaining independence from the social environment, some level of social maturity and a capability of self-management and self-actualization (2006a, p. 11). J. Andrzejewska perceives the problem similarly, understanding self-reliance as a personality trait and simultaneously a target to reach, linking it also with independence, self-determination, social maturity, autonomy, the ability of self-actualization and self-improvement, as well as with life competence (2013, p. 49).

Social self-reliance is rooted in self-maintenance, as well as, more widely speaking, in practical self-reliance. At the same time, the child develops mental self-reliance. While these three aspects of self-reliance – practical, mental and social – are referred to most commonly, in the literature on the subject, we can find a further variety of self-reliance areas. One of the most comprehensive studies of self-reliance indicates its following areas: motor skills, self-maintenance, self-reliance in terms of cognition, speech, thought, actions, psychological self-reliance, self-reliance in using various tools, self-reliance in social contacts and moral assessment and emotional control (Kuszak, 2006a, p. 35).

Various aspects of self-reliance intersect with each other and are interdependent. As a need, the developmental self-reliance “is not granted from birth, but it is a process of gaining control over factors determining action” (Andrzejewska, 2015, p. 5). The process of the development of self-reliance is complex, stretched in time and subject to a multitude of factors. The most significant among them include the factors that originate from a single individual, i.e., endogenous ones, such as the level of psychological and motor development, personality, emotionality, social development and self-assessment skills, and exogenous ones, particularly the family and preschool environments. Due to the multitude and complexity of these factors, each particular child presents an individual image of particularly shaped, autonomous and unique self-reliance.

Self-reliance is a condition for proper social relations, being a foundation of individual competencies in this regard. The ability to be self-reliant, which is expressed in a certain degree of independence from the environment (not only in the practical sense), is an important factor of the school maturity of the child. At the beginning of school education, the social ability of the student, as it relates to their ability to make friends, cope well with a new situation, make decisions and be involved and persistent, constitutes a key factor for success at school, as well as a vital factor of the sense of one's value and self-assessment.

The development of the area of social self-reliance leads to the formation of "socialized self-reliance" (Kuszak, 2006a, p. 33), which means that a person is capable of establishing social contacts, undertaking tasks responsibly, making decisions alone or with others, collaborating, being involved and persistent at work for the benefit of others, understanding and accepting social norms and adhering to them. Most certainly, preschool age is the crucial and the most appropriate time to build what is referred to as social self-reliance.

The state of research on the problem

The issue of self-reliance has been notable in child education considerations for many years. An analysis of the literature on the subject demonstrates that many scholars consider the issue of self-reliance as fundamental, emphasizing the matter of the development of a child's need to be independent. Although there is a lack of more extensive research on the social self-reliance of preschool children, it is worth taking a look at studies performed by other authors, which, even though they do not allow a direct comparison with my research results, they do let one reach certain conclusions.

The pro-social readiness of children in kindergartens in Lublin, Poland, was researched by S. Guz (1987). The results of her work led her to the conclusion that children who are in the facility for a longer time present a higher level of readiness for pro-social behaviors. Unfortunately, this does not refer to being ready to be self-reliant, which was more characteristic of children who attended the kindergarten for a shorter time.

S. Wilczyńska (2018) reached similar conclusions, having considered self-reliance to be understood as relieving others, which in her opinion is an important expression of pro-social behavior. Based on the conducted research, she tried to assess the self-reliance of children in traditional and alternative educational systems. The results she published prove that although "the researched

group of students from the traditional school declared being ready to be self-reliant to a higher degree than the researched group from a democratic school, in the actual task situation, the children subjected to the alternative educational system showed they are 100% ready” (p. 176). This may indicate that the alternative school coped better with the practical implementation of the call for children’s self-reliance. This thesis can also be confirmed by the conclusions drawn by J. Andrzejewska from her analysis of experiencing self-reliance in various systems and concepts of education, such as the Reggio Emilia approach, the Montessori or Celestin Freinet systems, or the Dalton Plan educational concept (Andrzejewska, 2015), which only confirms that nowadays, the contemporary traditional school and classical kindergarten might apply a number of ideas from the experience of alternative education.

K. Kuszak, in turn, analyzed the self-reliance of the preschool child as a result of taking over behaviors and social pressure, with particular emphasis put on the family environment closest to the child (2002). She also did research on the self-reliance of 185 four-year-olds from Poznań kindergartens, observing them both in self-maintenance situations and while performing tasks. The results she presents confirm the results of earlier research conducted by H. Kulas (1998) in a group of early-school children, which proved that internal control is more difficult and fails in situations which are new for the child. Also, the results of K. Kuszak’s study indicate that “four-year-olds are already capable of keeping elementary internal control over their own actions. This refers, however, to situations they are familiar with. In new situations, children asked for help more frequently and demonstrated their independence to a lesser degree” (Kuszak, 2006b, p. 13). Other interesting results are that the children participating in the research refused to get help in the family environment (more than 75%) more often than in kindergarten (55.4%), which, as the researcher explains, is the case because “in the kindergarten situation, children were more subjected [to authority] as they had no choice other than to accept the offered help,” and therefore, “most probably in kindergarten, children were expected to be submissive and such behaviors were reinforced” (Kuszak, 2006b, p. 10).

K. Kuszak researched also verbal and non-verbal means of displaying self-reliance by children. She reached the conclusion that “not all the verbal behaviors expressing self-reliance were a reflection of the actual researched abilities. Some of them were merely a declaration and a kind of boasting” (Kuszak, 2006b, p. 12), particularly in the case of putting toys in order. Generally speaking, however, children were rather cautious in expressing their independence in an

unknown situation, while demonstrating it in a well-known situation which they had experienced many times (Kuszek, 2006b, p. 13).

Many considerations in the literature on the subject refer to the self-reliance of students in preschool education viewed in the context of their ability to learn – for example, the work of M. Żmudzka (1995), B. Dudzińska (2002) or J. Karbowiczek (2015).

Methodological assumptions of the research

The reasons for undertaking empirical research on the issue of the social self-reliance of preschool children were observations and reflections that allowed me to put forward the following thesis: contemporary five and six-year-old children sometimes present an insufficient level of social self-reliance, which may hinder them from taking actions and fulfilling their future life roles, especially the role of a student, as well as developing independence and a sense of success.

The subject of the research was the social self-reliance of five and six-year-old children in the assessment of pre-school teachers, whereas the purpose of the research was an attempt to assess the social aspect of the self-reliance of five and six-year-old children attending kindergarten. The question of the level of social self-reliance of five and six-year-old children enrolled in traditional pre-school education constituted the research problem. Due to the diagnostic nature of the research, no hypotheses were made.

Results of the research

The author's own research was conducted in 2018 in pre-school education institutions in the Opole region. They consisted of the analysis of 530 observation sheets of five and six-year-old children. The records were the result of a systematic and continuous observation of children in kindergartens conducted by teachers in natural everyday situations. Table 1 shows data on the study population.

Table 1
The study population including age and sex difference

Age \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
5 years	129	48.9	118	44.4	247	46.6
6 years	135	51.1	148	55.6	283	53.4
Total	264	49.8	266	50.2	530	100

Source: own research.

In the research sample, there were slightly more six-year-olds (53.4%) than five-year-olds (46.6%) and almost as many girls (49.8%) as boys (50.2%). Among the observed children, preschoolers from the urban environment clearly dominated in numbers (86.8%), compared to children from rural kindergartens (13.2%). This is why the environment variable was not included in the analysis of individual research issues.

According to R. Schaffer's thesis, a child is capable of achieving an ever-higher level of development through interaction and cooperation with others (2005, p. 225). That is why the first indicator of a child's social self-reliance that I decided to study was his or her ability to cooperate with other children.

Table 2
Teachers' assessment of the cooperation of five and six-year-old children with other children, by gender, N = 530

Assessment \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very good	116	43.9	82	30.8	198	37.4
Good	121	45.8	123	46.2	244	46.0
Rather poor	22	8.4	46	17.3	68	12.8
Very poor	5	1.9	15	5.7	20	3.8
Total	264	100	266	100	530	100

Source: own research.

The data in Table 2 allow us to conclude that the vast majority (83.4%) of children under observation have no problems with cooperation (very good or good), according to the teachers' assessment. Certainly, the children gained social experience in interactions with others during previous education in the kindergarten – in younger groups. However, over 16% of the children are not good at cooperating (poor or very poor).

Considering the impact of the sex variable on the obtained research results, one can notice a clear advantage of girls, since their skills were assessed as very good more frequently than the boys' skills, while less frequently as poor or very poor.

The age variable – including five and six-year-old children – turned out to be less significant, although a subtle difference in results was seen in favor of the older children. The obtained results in both examined groups are similar, probably because the age diversity was not large.

Preschool children, due to their low level of socialization, sometimes make contacts with adults easier than with their peers. The results of the studies presented in Tables 3 and 4 prove that the interactions of children in a group of peers whom they know does not constitute a problem. On the other hand, it is more difficult for the studied children to make contacts with new persons, which is illustrated by the results in Table 5.

Table 3
Teachers' assessment of the cooperation of five and six-year-old children with the teacher, by gender, N = 530

Assessment \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very good	140	53.0	80	30.1	220	41.5
Good	101	38.3	117	44.0	218	41.1
Rather poor	17	6.4	58	21.8	75	14.2
Very poor	6	2.3	11	4.1	17	3.2
Total	264	100	266	100	530	100

Source: own research.

Table 4
Teachers' assessment of children's cooperation with the teacher, by age, N = 530

Assessment \ Age	5 years		6 years		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very good	92	37.2	128	45.2	220	41.5
Good	108	43.7	110	38.9	218	41.1
Rather poor	36	14.6	39	13.8	75	14.2
Very poor	11	4.5	6	2.1	17	3.2
Total	247	100	283	100	530	100

Source: own research.

The analysis of indicators included in Table 3 proves that, as before, the sex of the child is important in assessing their ability to cooperate with the teacher. Again, girls are assessed better (above all, the advantage is visible when assessed as very good). Taking into account the second variable – the age of children – there was a slight advantage of the six-year-old children over the five-year-old children regarding their skills (Table 4), which logically indicates that children's social skills increase with age.

Table 5
Teachers' assessment of the children's ability to make contact with new people, by gender, N = 530

Assessment \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very good	94	35.6	66	24.8	160	30.2
Good	110	41.7	124	46.6	234	44.1
Rather poor	50	18.9	59	22.2	109	20.6
Very poor	10	3.8	17	6.4	27	5.1
Total	264	100	266	100	530	100

Source: own research.

Another analyzed research aspect concerned the assessment of the children's social self-reliance in terms of their ability to make contacts with new persons. The results of the research presented in Table 5 indicate that these children's skills were rated lower than the previous ones (more than a quarter of the study population were classified at a low level). Again, girls have higher skills in the assessed area. Due to the lack of significant differences in results among five and six-year-old children, the data according to age was excluded here – it was also not included in the subsequent analyzed aspects. The tendency shown here is consistent with the results of K. Kuszak's research, which demonstrated that the fewest manifestations of children's autonomy were observed in new situations (Kuszak, 2006b, p. 13).

An important determinant of children's social self-reliance are decision-making and co-deciding skills. Like the previous ones, these skills turned out to be rather poor in more than a quarter of the group of studied children, with slightly higher scores given to girls than to boys (Table 6).

Table 6
Teachers' assessment of children's ability to make decisions or co-decide, by gender, N = 530

Assessment \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very good	105	39.8	73	27.4	178	33.6
Good	114	43.2	93	35.0	207	39.0
Rather poor	37	14.0	88	33.1	125	23.6
Very poor	8	3.0	12	4.5	20	3.8
Total	264	100	266	100	530	100

Source: own research.

Other important constituents in the assessment of children's social self-reliance are responsibility, commitment and perseverance in performing tasks. Tables 7 and 8 present data on these issues. In the vast majority of studied children (82.4%), commitment and perseverance while performing work for others were assessed as very good or good (Table 7). The differences in the assessment of girls and boys turned out to be small and insignificant.

Table 7

Teachers' assessment of children's commitment and perseverance while performing work for others, by gender, N = 530

Assessment \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very good	127	48.1	92	34.6	219	41.3
Good	113	42.8	105	39.5	218	41.1
Rather poor	19	7.2	61	22.9	80	15.1
Very poor	5	1.9	8	3.0	13	2.5
Total	264	100	266	100	530	100

Source: own research.

Table 8

Teachers' assessment of children's sense of responsibility when entrusted with a task to perform, by gender, N = 530

Assessment \ Sex	Girls		Boys		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very high	125	47.3	72	27.1	197	37.2
Rather high	115	43.6	123	46.2	238	44.9
Rather low	22	8.3	61	22.9	83	15.6
Very low	2	0.8	10	3.8	12	2.3
Total	264	100	266	100	530	100

Source: own research.

Five and six-year-old children generally present a responsible attitude toward the duties entrusted to them (82.1%). However, there is a group of 17.9% of them who, according to their teachers, show a low level of responsibility.

The results of the analyses can be considered rather optimistic. They prove that the majority of five and six-year-old children – in the opinion of their teachers – achieved autonomy (at a good and very good level) in the assessed

areas. However, there are also children whose skills were rated low or very low. They should be particularly supported on their way to self-reliance. The following summary (Figure 1) shows rating-based aspects of social self-reliance, indicating those that deserve special attention.

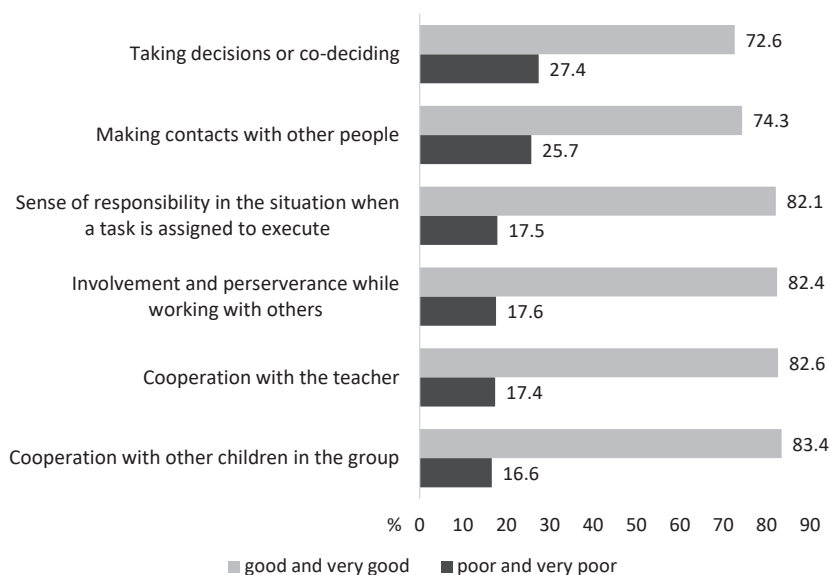


Figure 1.

Comparison of assessed aspects of social self-reliance – rating-based approach.

Source: own analysis.

Conclusions

According to D. Waloszek, few adult researchers take the search for the roots of adult competences in childhood seriously (Waloszek, 2006, p. 52). It seems that the reason for many educational and life failures may be a low level of independence, preventing the individual from developing autonomy, as well as creativity, self-confidence, a sense of competence and self-reliance.

The literature on the subject extensively emphasizes the issue of children's independence in practical terms, less attention is paid to mental autonomy and social self-reliance, which are necessary components of broadly understood independence. Social self-reliance is based on practical autonomy. Low levels of children's skills, helplessness and inefficiency in self-service and clean-up

activities are transferred to task situations, intellectual activity and social attitudes. Consequently, self-reliance should be promoted in all its aspects.

Therefore, it would be worthwhile to conduct research showing the self-reliance of the child in all its aspects and, in addition to practical autonomy, to examine social self-reliance and mental autonomy in a broader dimension and in various institutions.

Although the results of my research do not give grounds for broader generalizations due to the small size of the sample, they do indicate that the commitment and perseverance of children when performing work for others were assessed the highest, while their skills in making decisions and co-deciding, as well as in making contacts with new persons, obtained the lowest scores (Figure 1). This is in line with the results previously presented by other researchers of the issue. Therefore, when working with children, it is worth organizing educational situations that develop their social self-reliance, encourage them to make decisions and act on their own, regardless of the environment. It is worth withdrawing assistance in time, giving children a chance for independence. It is important, as J. Skibska writes, to support the child's development, which should result from the sensitivity and vigilance of the teacher who puts the child-student in the first place in order to strengthen his or her development potential and teach independent thinking and action (2018, p. 7). An important task of adults is also to help a child build self-esteem, because – as S. Wilczyńska writes – without a positive self-image, it is difficult to develop pro-social readiness (2018 p. 176).

The task of teachers is also to initiate and organize various forms of cooperation with parents aimed at making them aware of the need to develop and support their child's autonomy, not only in practical but also in intellectual and social terms. It should be remembered that the most important condition for the development of a child's autonomy is his or her sense of security, because only a child who feels safe is able to take the risk that something may go wrong.

In conclusion, it is hard to resist reflection that children who go to school from pre-school education (especially the traditional school, which – as S. Wilczyńska showed – immobilizes the student at the desk, limiting his or her freedom of speech and action) are not learning in a good atmosphere to develop autonomy (see Wilczyńska 2018, p. 172). Therefore, it seems advisable that teachers, both in pre-school and early school education, should reach for the tried and true upbringing concepts developed by their predecessors which largely propose solutions for the development of children's self-reliance.

In addition, it is worth looking once again at existing alternative education institutions in Poland, where one can find inspiration for change and encouragement to trust children and give them greater freedom in action and thinking, which creates a climate conducive to the development of self-reliance, including social self-reliance.

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