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Self-responsibility as a social competence determining active participation in the life of a social group - presentation of the results of research and a workshop

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Introduction

Polish society has had to cope with specific problems over recent decades. The multiple transformations of Polish life in 1989 resulted in the introduction of parliamentary democracy, a free-market economy and cultural pluralism, making it difficult for some people and social groups to find their place in the new situation. It seems that the attitude of the 'unresponsive bystander' (Latane and Darley, 1970) does not only arise in extreme situations (such as those connected with violence), but may be typical of this large group of people. In addition, world-wide tendencies towards globalisation on the one hand and local ties on the other may lead to a 'citizenship crisis', especially in the so called 'new democracies': this is why it is so important to promote active attitudes which allow us to mould our social environment.

Are there any factors conducive to the development of proactive attitudes? A critical period is childhood, when our values, attitudes and 'self' are beginning to take shape. Both family and school have a considerable effect on the development of this activity, so we should ask how the educational system and school can stimulate and promote proactive attitudes in children. This paper presents self-responsibility as a factor crucial to the development of proactive attitudes. It also describes part of a project whose aim was to develop self-responsibility at school.

Self-responsibility as social competence stimulating proactive attitudes in a group

The period between 6 and 11 years of age is an important one with regard to the development of identity (Erikson, 1968, 1982). Children set limits on 'I' (individual identity) and 'we' (social identity) through action. Their competences, abilities and skills, as well as their sense of responsibility, develop intensively. What are the competences conducive to activity in the group, and which of their elements are fundamental to further development of social activity?

Competence can be interpreted in many different ways: as a one-dimensional structure, that is, a skill or ability (Spencer et al. 1990; Furnham, 1990), or as a multi-dimensional structure (Roberts, 1997). Social competence which enables one to exist in a complex environment must also be complex, so I shall treat it as a three-element model including:

1. knowledge - the information and cognitive procedures necessary to reveal competence (Anderson, 1985);
2. attitudes - a relatively stable approach to the object of competence, determined by our beliefs, emotions, values and previous experiences (Wojciszke, 2002); and
3. abilities/skills - the effective use of the above procedures, making it possible for competence to reveal itself in behaviour.

A key social competence, allowing change from reactive social behaviour into active behaviour, is self-responsibility. In phenomenology and humanistic psychology self-responsibility is a special kind of responsibility, oriented at and developing with 'self' (Ingarden, 1987; Rogers, 1969, Erikson, 1968, 1982).

Using education to mould self-responsibility is not easy: no studies have been conducted on the relationships between knowledge about a social group, social abilities and proactive attitudes. Each educational process carried out in this area is at the same time a research process which enables better understanding of the social functions performed by children and stimulates the professional development of teachers who, through reflections on the actions they take and the activity of their pupils, become creative and active themselves.

This is the background to an investigation into self-responsibility and its development in children starting their primary school education on which this paper reports and which is ongoing. It would be difficult to say who benefited most from this process, as it was going on at three levels: (1) stimulation and observations of pupils' behaviours, (2) supporting the development of the teacher, and (3) the development of the researcher.

Meetings with pupils – inspiration and change

My meetings with primary school pupils started in February 2003 and took place on a regular basis, once a week. Each meeting was devoted to a workshop or a diagnostic project aimed at exploring three elements of self-responsibility: (1) passing on knowledge about the principles of social life; (2) the development of interpersonal and communication skills (3) stimulating the development of proactive attitudes. I conducted several coaching sessions with the teacher, during which we discussed the situation in the class, and was also keeping a personal diary, writing down my observations and reflections on the process.

1. The first meeting

Classroom

The pupils that participated in the project share their classroom with colleagues from the second form – the former learn there in the afternoon, and the latter in the morning. The classroom is clean and tidy, with colourful charts on the wall. To my great surprise, it turned out that 90% of the classroom space was decorated by the second form pupils.

Lesson organisation

When I arrived the pupils were sitting at traditionally arranged desks. They were trying to solve a mathematical problem and often consulted the teacher. A boy whose pen stopped writing also reported it to the teacher immediately.

When the pupils had completed their work I asked them about responsibility – what does it mean to be responsible? There were few responses: 'Responsible people take care of animals', or 'they take care of the flowers in the classroom'.

The teacher's opinion

'I didn't have classes with these pupils for half a year. During my absence the children from the second form decorated the classroom. I have nothing against it.'

Every year we organise a competition at school to choose the most beautiful classroom, and the tutor of the second form is very talented, so the classroom looks really nice. I still don't know these children well. They are a little frisky, so I have some problems with discipline.'

The researcher's opinion

I wondered about the sense of responsibility in children who for half a year had two different teachers, who could not feel at home in a classroom almost entirely arranged by other pupils, and who declared that to be considered responsible you have to fulfil your duties, observe the rules and be submissive to the teacher. The examples they gave showed they thought being responsible meant not to cause destruction and to respond promptly to orders. They seemed totally dependent on the teacher for their activities in school. Were my expectations too high? Would I succeed in stimulating their activity? Margaret (the teacher) could give me a lot of information on the pupils, but she particularly concentrated on their behaviour, rather than on their way of thinking.

2. Second meeting – 'Editorial Board' – a workshop

Description of the workshop

I proposed a game called 'Editorial Board'. The pupils were divided into small groups – editorial boards. Each group was given three blank pages of a newspaper and six pictures to go with six articles discussing different social problems:

- how to help disabled people in wheelchairs
- how adults should organise time for children who are bored
- how to make Poles use credit cards more frequently, as in other European countries
- how to help ill children in hospitals
- how to persuade pupils who throw litter about to keep their classroom tidy
- how to support old people protesting against too low pensions.

Each group was to place two articles on each page of the newspaper – the most important ones on the first page, less important on the second, and the least important on the third. First each pupil was supposed to think about his/her preferences, then the pupils were to work in small groups, present their proposals to the class, and finally all of them had to make a common decision about placing the articles in the newspaper. Then we were to discuss the way they organised their work – was it good? should it be changed? I paid particular attention to competence development at three levels: (1) gaining knowledge about teamwork, (2) acquiring the experience indispensable for developing the ability/skill to work as a team member, and (3) stimulating proactive attitudes by getting personally involved, stirring up emotions and evoking team spirit.

The performance of the task

The pupils needed very little time to decide about their preferences and quickly passed on to team work, which was organised quite differently in particular groups:

- (a) in the first group an authoritarian leader appeared. One of the girls made the others keep silent, took the newspaper and started to stick the articles in herself. Some of the children agreed with her choices; the others simply stopped working;
- (b) in the second group all decisions were made by voting;
- (c) in the third group three girls were discussing their opinions, not letting the other pupils speak for themselves, so they quickly became passive;
- (d) in the fourth group there was a quarrel: everybody took one article and stuck it in any empty place.

When the work was completed the pupils were asked to justify their choices, which they usually did rather laconically, saying 'we thought this problem to be important'. They were willing to talk about the work itself, its organisation and advantages, and expressed their general opinions on the workshop.

My suggestion that they should now arrive at a common decision concerning the arrangement of the articles caused complete chaos in the classroom - everybody tried to take the newspapers and place the articles according to their own preferences. They were arguing and pushing one another. After three or four minutes I decided to intervene and asked them why they had not managed to complete the task successfully. The children were very excited and all wanted to answer at the same time: 'Because everybody wanted to decide', 'Because there were too many of us', 'Because you didn't tell us how to do that'. When I asked them how the work should have been organised to satisfy them all, they said that everybody should have the right to decide. When I asked them if it would not be better if I decided for them, to prevent quarrels and arguments, they said: 'No, it would be unjust! We wouldn't know what you wanted to do, and we *must* know it'. After a short discussion they agreed that voting for or against each of the articles would be the best method of making final decisions, so we carried out the voting.

The teacher's opinion

'I realised that if they are really interested in the problem they are to solve, you don't have to establish any rules for them, as they will do it themselves. Some groups did it intuitively and naturally, in the course of work. Some others started their work with adopting certain rules, and it was their own idea, which is amazing. In some situations they are ready to lay down the rules themselves, that they need them! Some children do it intuitively, others are fully aware of this process.'

The researcher's opinion

The pupils engaged actively in the work, naturally functioning at two levels: the level of action and the *meta* level, connected with conscious organisation of the work. Their comments and observations concerning the task show that they wanted to have an influence on the situation, and that this influence could not be replaced with anything else. During voting all of them displayed great enthusiasm when their option was chosen by classmates. They also demonstrated discontent when their proposal was rejected by the group, but did not protest. The situation aroused excitement, and it may be that these strong emotions made the children engage in the work with passion. This suggests that if a teacher wants to involve pupils in a task, the task must be exciting.

3. The last meeting – ‘Parliament’ – a workshop

Description of the workshop

The pupils were asked to settle the following problems connected with daily school life:

- leaving the classroom for break
- keeping their workplace tidy
- talking during the lesson
- being allowed to speak during the lesson (taking the floor).

The meeting started with four stories illustrating the consequences of letting these problems remain unsettled. Then I told the children how various problems are regulated by Parliament, how particular parliamentary committees work, how bills are proposed and passed. I suggested that they should try to solve their school problems in a similar way. I performed the role of Speaker of Parliament and addressed the pupils formally (‘Ladies and Gentlemen, a motion concerning... was put forward’ etc.). The children were divided into four committees, and each was given one problem to settle. Then representatives of each committee presented their proposals to the class, which – as Parliament – voted for or against them. I suggested that they should hang their proposals on the wall, but it turned out that there was no room for them. Suddenly the children noted that the whole space was occupied by work done by the second form pupils. The children decided it should be changed – they wanted to talk to the second form tutor and pupils.

The performance of the task

The pupils treated this task very seriously, listening carefully to the introductory stories. They worked efficiently in groups, analysing and discussing the problems in detail. The class did not interrupt the speakers presenting their proposals and only occasional comments were made. The voting stirred up strong emotions, but the majority of the motions were accepted. The committees whose motions were rejected showed discontent, but did not protest. After the lesson the pupils tried to find some place in the classroom to display their proposals. They were surprised to discover that the whole space was occupied by pictures painted by their colleagues from the second form. Some were indignant at the situation, even swearing about it. When I asked them what could be done, there were different opinions: ‘Let’s throw their works away’, ‘Let’s agree that half of the classroom is theirs, and the other half is ours’, ‘These pictures are nice, so we should let them stay’. Each of the proposals was put to the vote. Finally they decided the classroom space should be divided into halves. Then the pupils discussed how they would inform their colleagues about this. One of the boys suggested they should meet with both the second form tutor and pupils to tell them about this decision. His proposal was accepted by the class.

Teacher’s opinion

‘I was astonished to see how easily they adapted to the convention of a parliamentary debate, how mature and effective they were in their work. They engaged completely in the task. I think it’s a good idea to talk to the second form pupils about sharing the classroom, but I’m afraid it may cause a conflict, I’m not sure if they will be able to do that properly. To me the greatest surprise was that

on the next day after the workshop, when I asked them if everybody was ready for break, they decided to vote on it - they liked this way of making decisions that much! Something else also happened. After two days they brought me a three-page school newspaper, where in unskilful handwriting they asked questions concerning school and education: 'Is our class OK?', 'Is it good to learn?', etc. Below there were the results of voting'.

The researcher's opinion

I was greatly surprised by the children's dedication to the task. The convention of a parliamentary debate made them work efficiently and focus. When I talked to them in formal language they obeyed my orders willingly, which resulted in good organisation of the voting. I was also astonished how much they were moved when they discovered that there was no room for their work. This probably made them think not only about the division of the classroom space, but also about their role and position. They found that they had certain rights, and wanted to exercise them. I was afraid that they would vote for throwing away the paintings made by the second form pupils – I don't know what I would have done in such a situation. Maybe the lesson in democratic methods of decision-making helped them to choose negotiations as the best option. It is interesting that they did not want to negotiate with the second form tutor only, but also with their colleagues. The fact that they spontaneously applied the method of voting while making other decisions in the class, as well as the initiative they displayed while 'editing' the newspaper, encouraged me to believe that my work will bear fruit.

Transformations

The pupils

During my two months' work with these pupils I noted considerable changes in their behaviour. They work more efficiently, with greater devotion. They employ the methods presented during the workshops when making decisions related to their daily school life. They are proactive, ready to take the initiative: edit a newspaper, negotiate the division of the classroom space with their schoolmates. They act as hosts in the classroom. When faced with a problem, they choose negotiation rather than pressure.

The teacher

At the beginning of our cooperation the teacher declared she had problems with maintaining discipline. She concentrated only on the pupils' behaviour. During our meetings she began to pay more attention to the children's intentions and way of thinking. After some time she discovered that her pupils were able to solve certain problems, organise their work or establish rules themselves, provided that they were assigned interesting tasks.

The researcher

At first I had serious doubts about this project. I was afraid that due to my high expectations I would have to wait months for any results, but when I began to assign more complicated tasks and to let the pupils take responsibility, without imposing too many regulations, to my surprise they managed to control chaos and establish order. When I was told about the spontaneous actions they had undertaken, I became convinced that our

meetings had resulted in significant changes in their functioning in various areas of school life.

Conclusions

This paper presents the results of a project aimed at developing self-responsibility in younger primary school pupils. The project was intended to promote active social attitudes. It was based on the assumption that actions stimulating simultaneous development of knowledge, abilities/skills and attitudes lead to active participation in social (school) life. The workshop described may be a source of inspiration for both teachers and researchers. It shows that in the diagnostic and educational process we should focus not only on stimulation and measurement, but also on the dynamics of changes and reflection, which are crucial elements of self-responsibility development in both pupils and teachers.

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