



This paper is taken from

*Citizenship Education in Society
Proceedings of the ninth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2007

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-1899764-90-7

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Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, B. (2007) Children's Understanding of Pupils' Responsibility – A Self-Responsibility Model, in Ross, A. (ed) Citizenship Education in Society. London: CiCe, pp 417-430.

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The rector and the staff of the University of Montpellier III
- Andrew Craven, of the CiCe Administrative team, for editorial work on the book, and Lindsay Melling and Teresa Carbajo-Garcia, for the administration of the conference arrangements
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement

Children's understanding of pupils' responsibility – a self-responsibility model

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to present the concept of student's responsibility as understood by younger primary school children. The interviews and responsibility dilemma tests conducted during the experiment on a group of 100 younger primary school pupils provided the basis for: (1) developing a model of subjective responsibility, and (2) determining the factors that stimulate and promote responsibility. The model consisting of two dimensions: (1) subjective versus formal responsibility, and (2) responsibility to be borne (negative) versus to be taken (positive), was verified empirically. Three-year action research enabled also to determine four factors stimulating the development of responsibility.

Introduction

The concept of responsibility has recently attracted public interest and the attention of philosophers, psychologists and sociologists. The transformations connected to globalisation and technological development that are being observed in societies gives in new possibilities of choice. Consequently, people face a variety of options on a previously unknown scale; however, they also have the feeling of lost chances. The research conducted by Polish psychologists and sociologists shows that an increase in pessimism is followed by a decrease in civic activity in Polish society, which manifests itself in, for example, a gradually lower percentage of voting in general elections as well as a gradually lower percentage of members and volunteer activists of social associations and organizations (Krzemiński, 2005). The majority of adult Poles show passivity and withdrawal (Grzelak, 2005). The ability to find one's place in a world of social changes calls for a re-formulation of a self-concept both as a member of a social group and as an autonomous person. In order to stimulate personal development and to experience satisfaction stemming from activity, a person should perceive:

- (1) himself/herself as the source of his/her behaviour,
- (2) his/her own goals as the object of his/her intentions,
- (3) the world around as the chance for his/her own possibilities (Obuchowski, 1997).

These changes, that from the point of view of an individual can be termed a *revolution of subjects* (Obuchowski 2000), influence the turning point in thinking about education – not only about the role of the educational system in children's development but also about the role of the child in this educational system. Education ceases to be treated as a tool for transmitting the culturally accepted message and starts to be understood in terms of constructivist categories – as organising an environment in which students construct the knowledge on their own. The said turning point is connected with the change in our

This paper is part of *Citizenship Education in Society: Proceedings of the ninth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A, published by CiCe (London) 2007. ISBN 978-1899764-90-7; ISSN 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

perception of the student: now they are no longer subordinated to the system but become an autonomous person who is the creator of the world of his/her personal meanings. Therefore, in the context of the changes, the readiness on the part of the student to assume a subjective control over his/her behaviour as well as to take responsibility for own actions becomes especially important.

Traditionally, *responsibility* is understood as bearing the consequences for breaking the rules and regulations prevailing within society. Philosophers, however, point out the ambiguity of the term *responsibility*. It may be used in the context of:

- bearing the responsibility – understood as guilt,
- holding a person responsible – associated with punishment,
- taking the responsibility – inner readiness to act and
- responsible behaviour – a conscious action undertaken while understanding the situation one is acting in (Ingarden, 1987).

Many philosophical theories underline the fact that responsibility is a typically human phenomenon. Therefore, among all living creatures, it belongs solely to man since it is linked to an awareness of acting that is possessed by human beings alone (Ingarden, 1987). The following two philosophical approaches are important as for the contemporary understanding of responsibility:

Existentialism – which draws our attention to the necessity of placing the instance of responsibility in man himself who is regarded as a free person (Heidegger and Sartre, after: Nowicka-Kozioł, 1993)

Personalism – which draws our attention to the subjective character of responsibility, stressing at the same time that being responsible lies in human nature – he/she creates an inner set of norms to which he/she is responsible. Responsibility *is in man* and its existence does not depend on whether it is exacted by the external norms or not (Wojtyła, 1985, 1992).

In psychology, there are three main approaches regarding the perception of responsibility:

1. An attributive approach focusing on examining and describing the conditions and means of ascribing responsibility to the consequences stemming from own actions as well as from the actions of others (Heider, 1958, Wright, 1964, Fishbein, 1973, Reykowski, 1986, Daszkowski, 1983).
2. A cognitive theory of moral development approach; although not answering the questions connected with the readiness to bear or to take the responsibility, nevertheless points to a mature way of moral reasoning which may be the basis for the development of self-responsibility. From the perspective of responsibility, the period of autonomy (Piaget, 1967) or conventional morality (Kohlberg, 1984), both concerned with one's personal standard, norm and rule determination, make the assuming of self-responsibility possible.

3. A personal approach related to the creation of a self-concept of a responsible person, stresses responsibility as a subjective phenomenon is stressed. Zimny (1984) and Derbis (1987) point to the existence of a psychological phenomenon they label *sense of responsibility*. The term is understood as the readiness to undertake responsible actions due to the fact that the person perceives himself/herself as responsible. In this depiction, responsibility respects both subjective and moral approaches.
 - a. Firstly, it refers to the responsibility connected with accepting the consequences of one's own actions in the situation when they violate the rights of some other person, i.e. *bearing responsibility*.
 - b. Secondly, understanding the responsibility as *taking responsibility*, thus controlling one's actions so they do not bring negative effects.

The approaches discussed demonstrate the complexity and multi-dimensional character of the responsibility phenomenon. However, they also show the evolution of contexts in which responsibility appears: from the ascribed meaning of guilt to a broadly understood subjective regulation of one's behaviour.

There is the need, therefore, to arrange the meanings and contexts related to responsibility (in its traditional, i.e. *moral*, as well as more contemporary, *subjective*, approaches) and to answer the question about the extent to which responsibility in its different forms is manifested by people. It is especially interesting, both from scientific and practical points of view, whether the youngest children, being on the brink of their social 'career', are ready to demonstrate responsible behaviour, and what might be even more important, how to stimulate the development of their responsibility.

This study presents the concept of a subjective responsibility, which is the result of a three-year research study conducted on a group of younger primary school pupils. Both the model and the tests concerning its verification point to the readiness of children to take as well as to bear the responsibility subjective in nature. Additionally, the so-called *action research* allowed to determine the educational factors that might stimulate the development of children's responsibility.

Method

The research was conducted in two dimensions. The main examination was based on action research methodology and in practice meant the participation of the researcher-educator in the classes of one of the primary school forms for three years (thus it started when the pupils were 7 and lasted until they were 10). Therefore, it was a longitudinal study. The class participation was both passive (observation) and active – conducting specially designed classes stimulating the development of those factors that stimulate responsibility. This type of research also required keeping a researcher's diary. The majority of classes were either filmed or recorded on tapes. Moreover, the children were asked to write their thoughts on special work cards that later were collected. As a result, a theoretical model of responsibility was constructed and educational factors influencing the formation of self-responsibility in children were determined.

The second type of examination was based on quantity research and it aimed at verification of the self-responsibility model. It encompassed 92 pupils aged 7 – 11 on whom individual responsibility dilemma tests were conducted. The interviews with children were recorded and then categorised by competent judges. The next sections will deal respectively with:

- Self-responsibility model and its empirical verification
- Factors stimulating the development of self-responsibility and fragments of children's comments illustrating the mechanisms behind the development of these factors.

Self-responsibility Model

While constructing the model, two responsibility dimensions, which are present in the definitions of the phenomenon, were considered:

- Responsibility *for* the actions,
- Responsibility *towards* the instance.

In literature, the responsibility *for* the actions is understood in two ways. Firstly, there is the responsibility *for* compensating negative consequences of own behaviour, secondly, responsibility *for* such an action which will not allow for these negative consequences to appear/happen. A straightforward reference to such understanding of responsibility may be found in the concept of Derbis (1993) who points out to two types of responsibility, namely:

- (1) *negative responsibility* connected with *bearing* the consequences resulting from certain actions and
- (2) (2) *positive responsibility*, related to *taking* the readiness to plan, control and correct behaviour because of the laws of nature and culture.

The second dimension of responsibility refers to the responsibility *towards* some instance. In psychology and philosophy alike responsibility is understood in terms of moral development, having its origins in natural or cultural laws (Zawadzki, 1983). There is also responsibility *towards* oneself. This approach is stressed most vividly in existential philosophy as well as in personalistic philosophy. Therefore, it is possible to determine the responsibility *towards moral norms* and the responsibility *towards oneself*, an individual who is both an element and a creator of social life. These elements include two kinds of responsibility:

- (1) the responsibility towards oneself, that is a self-responsibility, and
- (2) the responsibility towards moral norms, laws of nature of culture, that is a formal responsibility.

Combining these two dimensions of responsibility *for* and *towards* creates the model of responsibility illustrated in figure 1. According to this model, there are four types of responsibility:

Type 1: *Formal responsibility to be borne* is the responsibility towards certain rules of behaviour. It is connected with bearing the consequences or supplying compensation because of the existing rules that have been violated. In case of this type of responsibility, this is the rule, which is external in relation to the person, that regulates our behaviour. The presence of a guard of the rule stimulates responsible actions, however, the lack of such a guard (i.e. a policeman, a ticket collector, a parent, a teacher) releases the person from the duty to comply with it. Pupils who manifest this kind of responsibility negate neither the consequences of their own actions nor the legitimacy of compensation when it comes to disclosure of the rule violation. They agree with the consequences if they 'are caught' while breaking the rule. Moreover, they show understanding and rebel neither against the consequences nor the compensation they must supply. Yet, when breaking of the rule is not disclosed, the pupils avoid the consequences or compensation.

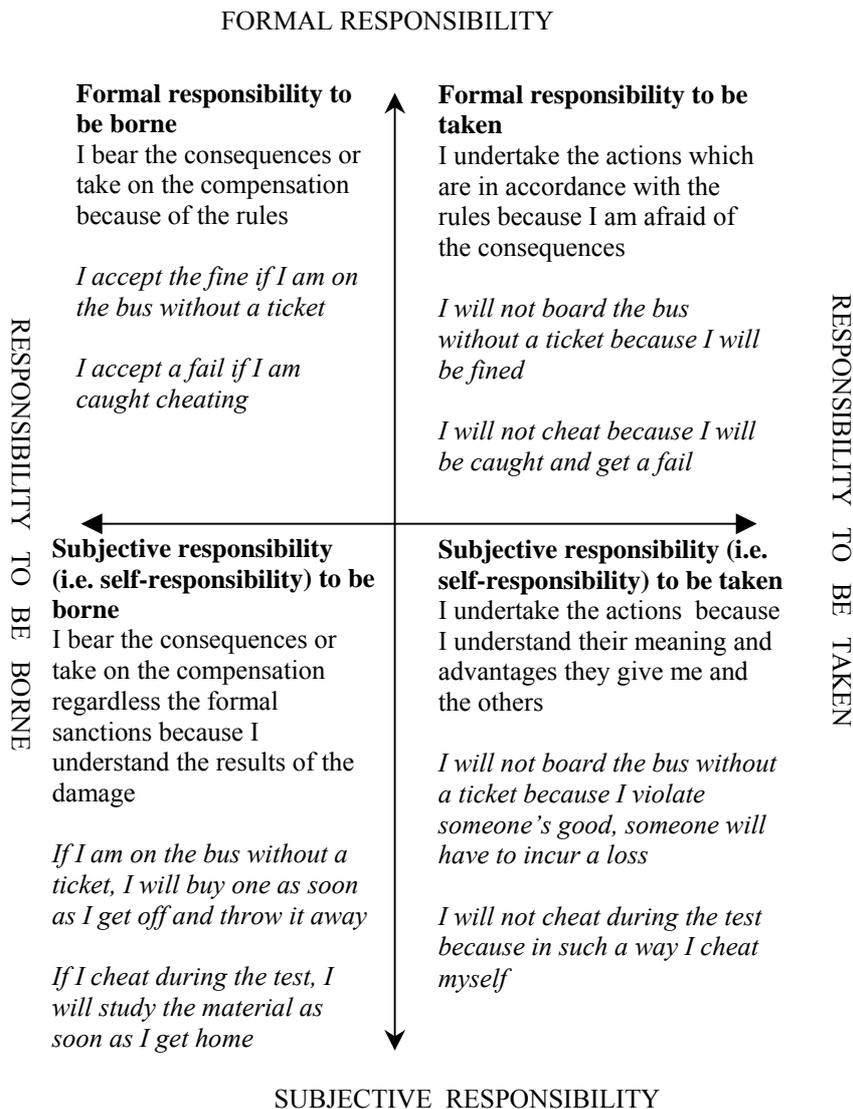
Type 2: *Formal responsibility to be taken* is connected with controlling our own behaviour in such a way that it does not interfere with the good of others and respects the prevailing rules. The manifestation of this kind of responsibility is related to the *undertaking* of actions characterised by responsibility. Here the behaviour is regulated by the norm and the rule just because they exist and not because they have any special meaning for the subject. In terms of education, formal responsibility to be taken is demonstrated in such a control over the behaviour that it does not violate the rules established at school (in class) and/or it does not lead to breaking of the said rules.

Type 3: *Subjective responsibility to be taken* means the readiness to plan, control and correct our own behaviour because of the existing rules. The principles are respected because their meaning is understood. In terms of education, a person who manifests this type of responsibility controls or plans his/her behaviour in such a way that the established rules (either formal or informal ones) prevailing in class or at school are not violated and his/her actions do not lead to their breaking. This behaviour is related to respecting the rules because of their regulatory meaning for the person or for others as well as to not leading to breaking the rules because of a potential individual loss or personal values.

Type 4: *Subjective responsibility to be borne* means taking on the consequences or the compensation if it comes to the violation of rules or the infringement of somebody's good. The consequences are accepted not because of the existence of the rule but because of the understanding of its regulatory values and consequences, both for the person and for the others. Its nature is external and it does not need any 'sanctions' in form of a punishment in order to demonstrate a responsible behaviour. Its subjective character is the sole reason that such a person selects a sanction himself/herself and becomes responsible for the compensation before himself/herself. In terms of education, this type of responsibility means bearing the consequences of one's own actions while respecting the rules but at the same time without relating to them. Accepting the outcomes of one's own actions does not stem merely from the fact that a certain rule exists but from the awareness of the damage for the subject. A person who manifests subjective responsibility to be borne is ready to supply compensation even when the breaking of the rule is not disclosed, and at the same time, despite the compensation

related to the rules, he/she supplies a personal compensation, i.e. the one that aims at compensating the loss to the subject.

Fig.1 Model of self-responsibility



The model presented is not a dynamic one although it assumes that certain types of responsibility are more mature than others. For instance, formal responsibility seems to refer rather to the term of *diligence* or *subordination* whereas subjective responsibility goes with the term *autonomy*. Responsibility to be borne will thus be more adaptive and reactive in nature and responsibility to be taken will be more proactive, i.e. connected with one's own influence, self-consciousness and control.

The determination of the suggested dimensions of the responsibility model poses a question about the nature of children's responsibility and whether and to what extent they are ready to take and bear the self-responsibility. In order to find the answer to the question, tests on a group of pupils on the brink of an institutional (school) education aged 7-11 were carried out. 100 pupils participated in the examination. Due to the lack of some data and factors interfering with the process of examination (e.g. going back to the class or going home), the comments of 92 children out of the total number were analysed. The examination was conducted individually. Each participant was presented with a set of eight dilemmas of responsibility. Each dilemma was presented in two different forms:

- (1) As an open dilemma – here a typical school situation known to the pupil or pupils from his/her own experience was presented. After the presentation the child was asked the following question: *what would you do if you were these pupils?*
- (2) Next, the same situation was presented as a closed dilemma – here two different ways of dealing with the described situation chosen by two different pupils were presented. The child was asked about the way she would choose herself – whether it would be similar to pupil A or to pupil B's one – and why the child had decided for this very option.

The aim of these two ways of presenting the dilemmas was to obtain both spontaneous interpretations disclosing the potential type of responsibility and the readiness to choose between the two types of responsibility considering the dimensions of the model: *formal* and *subjective*.

The results show that:

In the case of open dilemmas, 43% of children manifest the readiness to take the subjective responsibility while supplying the following explanation: e.g. I would do the homework in order: *to get to a good secondary school (lyceum), to have a good job, to be able to learn more, because it is better if you know more, the knowledge is for knowing*, I would bring my work books because: *there are many interesting things in them, without them I would work less and remember less, I would be bored during classes and so I could disturb others*; 56% of children demonstrate the readiness to take the formal responsibility like, for example: I would do my homework in order: *to have good marks, to get a final certificate with good marks and thus to get a 'perfect pupil' distinction, to pass to the next form, because I won't have any negative comments in my teacher-parents correspondence book and so the parents won't be angry with me, because the teacher says so and that's why you have to do it*. I would bring my work books because: *there is my homework there and it's our obligation to do it, if I am not prepared, I will get 1 (i.e. the lowest mark) or a negative comment, why should I get a bad mark only because of forgetting*.

In the case of closed dilemmas, the number of pupils choosing the solutions subjective in nature is much higher. 71% of all the participants manifested the choice of such a behaviour in which the child either took or bore the self-responsibility: e.g. they were for

Kasia who did not do her homework but *in the afternoon she would catch up with it despite the fact that the teacher will not check it anymore*, or Jacek who claims that he brings his exercise book to class in order *not to sit doing nothing during the lesson because without that exercise book he would waste time and wouldn't learn much*. 29% of the pupils decided for the behaviour in which the children take or bear only the formal responsibility: e.g. they were for Agnieszka who did not do her homework and *she agrees with the negative comment she gets for its lack; yet, she spent the whole afternoon reading an interesting book*, or Bartek who claims that he *brings his work book to class because of the rules at school and if he doesn't bring it, he may get a negative comment or the teacher may talk to the parent about it, that is why it doesn't make any sense to forget about the work book*.

In case of the dilemmas connected with the violation of the rules - in other words those that generate the readiness to *bear* the responsibility - the majority of children (59%) limited their behaviour to formal responsibility, for instance: if I were on duty and forgot to water the plants and so the plants withered: *I would get a reproof from the teacher, the teacher would be angry with me, I would never again be on duty, I would promise not to do it again*; if I happened to cheat during a test: *I would get 1 (i.e. the lowest mark), if the teacher noticed, she would be angry, I would get a negative comment to show parents*. However, there is a certain group of children, 40%, which points to the bearing of subjective consequences. The children facing the dilemma of the pupil on duty who neglected the school plants, say: *I would buy back the plants, I would give the next pupil on duty some money to buy plant fertiliser and maybe the plants could come back to life*. As for the cheating during a test, they claim that: *I would learn the material later on at home, you have to know it anyway, such cheating would have to be made up for with studying*. When it comes to closed dilemmas, as many as 82% of pupils would choose the solution connected with an additional subjective compensation. In case of the boy who cheated during the test, the pupils opted for the behaviour of the boy who, despite the fact that the teacher did not notice his cheating, decided to catch up with the material from the test later on at home. 65% of pupils were able to justify their choice by pointing to the subjective behaviour of the protagonist, i.e. *because he finally learnt the material and it may be useful in the future, he will want to know more, because he will not be a cheater, he will feel better with it*.

In case of the dilemmas connected with the possibility of taking responsibility, almost half of the pupils (47%) opt for the subjective solutions, e.g. there is no point in talking during the class, *because you might miss something interesting, important the teacher is saying, the others want to know it and the talking disturbs them, when you talk the others don't learn*. 52% agree with taking the responsibility because of its formal nature, e.g. there is no use talking during the class *because the teacher will give us a negative comment, you may have your mark lowered*. With closed dilemmas, the number of children choosing subjective justifications goes up to 59%.

It seems that a large group of children spontaneously manifest the readiness to take and bear the responsibility subjective in nature. In cases of a closed dilemma, when the child can compare the subjective behaviour versus the formal one, the degree of this readiness is higher. What is interesting is that the responsibility more often tends to become

subjective in the situations related to the responsibility *to be taken* rather than *to be borne*.

Educational factors stimulating the development of self-responsibility

As a result of the conducted research, including both the observation and the workshop, educational factors stimulating the development of self-responsibility were determined. One of them is described below.¹

Creating an active orientation understood as:

- (1) Developing the openness towards the feedback perceived as the source of knowledge about potential dangers,
- (2) Using the mistakes and evaluation as positive feedback characterized by development, and
- (3) Creating the openness towards drawing conclusions from own experience.

According to the responsibility model proposed in this study, responsibility is related not only to bearing the consequences stemming from one's own actions but, above all, also to the ability of controlling our own behaviour in such a way that it does not interfere with the good of others and at the same time helps to reach the goals important for us. Manifestation of the activity conducted in order to realize one's own plans is an important element of the responsibility for our own person because it shifts the responsibility from external conditions onto the very person himself/herself who becomes the creator of the reality and not merely its passive observer. In psychology an active orientation towards reality, the readiness to influence it in order to succeed is known under the name of proactivity (Seibert et al., 1999). The research shows (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Robitschek, 1998, Baum and Locke, 2004) that persons whose behaviour tends to be proactive are characterised by specific features and abilities: they are capable of initiative, can foresee problems and while acting out, they generally focus on seeking the possibilities to solve them and actively look for new abilities. An interesting question about the extent to which the children are ready to manifest proactive behaviour at school appears. To answer it, certain categories connected with different types of activity were determined. The observations of the work performed by the pupils during the realisation of the project led to the determination of the group of active types of behaviour related to the pupils' work during the lesson in the following areas: (1) work organisation, (2) building relations with others, (3) participation in task realisation, and (4) self-reliance. Next, these types of behaviour were classified by competent judges in two different dimensions:

- Re-active – understood as undertaking the tasks presented for realization, with the focus on the realization, without the consideration of the process

¹ A more detailed analysis, including examples and suggested communication models, was presented in the book *Odpowiedzialność podmiotowa dzieci* [Self-responsibility of Children] (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2007).

- Pro-active – understood as taking the initiative, influencing the realization of the tasks, their modification, with the focus not only on the goal but also on the process of the task realization.

The two dimensions partially refer to the theory of Murray (1964) who selects certain types of behaviour determined by external (reactive) stimuli and circumstances and those having their source in an active personality creating the reality around them.

Each dimension considers certain behaviour categories that make up a continuum. Their comparison and respective descriptions are presented in Table 2 below.

In order to establish the profile of the younger primary school pupils' activity, individual interviews with 42 of them were conducted. Each pupil was presented with a set of closed questions in which the pupil was asked to point out the way of behaving in a given situation. Answering the questions, each time the pupils could choose from three different types of behaviour: (1) proactive (2) reactive or (3) passive.

Table 2

REACTIVE BEHAVIOUR	PROACTIVE BEHAVIOUR
TASK-ORIENTED CATEGORY	
MANAGEMENT	INITIATIVE
Supervises the group work, gives orders connected with work organisation, focuses on the earlier determined goal, manifests managerial behaviour characterised by firmness and the lack of openness towards the discussion about it.	Makes suggestions concerning the group work organisation and the contentious issues settlement.
INTERPERSONAL CONTACT	
DIRECTIVENESS in contacts with others	ENCOURAGEMENT in contacts with others
Makes the decisions for others, does the work for them	Helps others, supports them in their work, boosts their courage and encourages co-operation
GIVING ONE'S CONSENT	
OBEDIENCE	APPROVAL
Quickly starts the realisation of the tasks, voices neither approvals nor protests, does what he/she is supposed to do without any personal engagement.	Quickly starts the realization of the tasks, shows the approval for the project before commencing any action, either expresses the agreement directly or manifest it clearly.
PERFORMANCE-REALISATION	
SUBMISSION	INDEPENDENCE
Realises the tasks according to the pattern, participates in the works at a clear request or when provided with an incentive.	Fulfils the tasks independently, participates in the works without any incentive or request, solves the problems himself/herself and does not involve others unnecessarily.

The interviewer would first ask the pupil to imagine a certain situation that takes place during the lesson, then to listen to three possible ways of behaving in such a situation and finally to choose the option that harmonises with him/her best. Below there are two examples of tasks:

Example 1 – A proactive choice versus a reactive one in the dimension of: *Independence*:
When I work in a group, I:

- a/ work willingly if somebody tells me exactly what to do [Subordination]
- b/ eagerly watch what the others are doing [Passivity]
- c/ eagerly start working without waiting for a request [Independence]

Example 2 - A proactive choice versus a reactive one in the dimension of: *Relations with others*: When we work in a group and somebody is sitting aside and does not work, I:

- a/ show the person what we are doing to make him/her join us [Encouragement]
- b/ tell the person to start working with us [Directiveness]
- c/ wait until the person joins us from his/her own accord [Passivity]

The results show the following:

22% of the pupils describe themselves as passive when it comes to work during the lesson. The highest rate of passivity (27%) was observed in the dimension of relationship building with others during group work whereas the lowest (5%) in the dimension of independence.

The majority of the pupils express a readiness to take a proactive action:

- The pupils perceive themselves as being of scant directiveness (18%) and showing the tendency to initiative (35%) in relations with others during group work.
- The pupils also have a subjective feeling of manifesting an organizational incentive (58%) rather than of an authoritative supervision of the group work (14%).
- The largest group of pupils indicates towards the manifestation of reactive types of behaviour in the dimensions of: *Independence* (Subordination – 42%) and *Realisation* (Obedience – 39%).

The pupils are convinced about one's own proactivity. This proactivity is bigger in the area related to relations in comparison with the area related to task functioning. The examination of the level of pupils' activity during the classes when the competent judges were evaluating the number of actions of each type showed that when the class is conducted with the use of traditional school methods, the pupils generally tend to manifest reactivity. However, when the teacher while conducting the class introduces the group work methods, the level of proactivity increases significantly, both in the task-oriented and relation-oriented areas (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2004).

Summary

In the context of social changes observed in the past few years, a turning point in people's thinking about their own subjectivity seems to be indispensable – looking at oneself and not at others as the source of behaviour and perceiving the surrounding

world in terms of possibilities and not obstacles. The readiness to take and to bear the responsibility for one's own actions becomes of special significance. The meaning of the term 'responsibility' has undergone a noticeable quality change recently and psychologists together with philosophers draw our attention to its subjective dimension. The variety of contexts in which the responsibility is being discussed as well as the social and cultural changes linked to the previous decade bring two major questions to the fore. Namely, what responsibility means to the people living on the verge of two centuries, and whether the young generation of citizens who are just on the brink of their 'institutional' as well as 'social' education are ready to manifest self-responsibility. On the grounds of a longitudinal examination conducted in the action research methodology on a group of 25 pupils as well as the tests conducted with the use of quantity and quality methods (92 pupils), a responsibility model was constructed and educational factors stimulating the development of self-responsibility were determined. Four dimensions of the responsibility model were adapted to school conditions. The research shows that a large group of younger primary school children are spontaneously ready to manifest the responsibility of a subjective type related to the role of a pupil. In case of the responsibility to be borne connected with the violation of rules, subjective regulations seem to be of less importance in comparison with the responsibility to be taken relating to the possibility of influencing one's behaviour. Organizing workshop-like classes that allow for co-operation among the pupils results in the increase of an active orientation which makes a significant part of self-responsibility.

The results presented create new questions that determine the direction of further research. Understanding of both personal and family determinants of self-responsibility seems to be an interesting issue. It might turn out that certain character traits as well as the factors connected with the family environment (attitudes of parents, system of values) are especially stimulating for the development of such a form of responsibility. A similar question arises in the educational sector; it concerns teachers, their competence and values as well as the level of their self-responsibility. The constructed model of responsibility and the first research results may turn out to be the very components to make further research in the said fields easier.

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