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Teachers' needs and possibilities in overcoming educational problems

The phenomenon of educational problems in working with youth is one of the common experiences every teacher has. Those who in their professional practice most frequently deal with the “difficult student”, a term used in both the professional jargon and the literature, are the gimnazjum (junior high school) teachers. It is largely related to the fact that youth in this very age undergo the early adolescence developmental crisis and a resulting intensification of adaptation problems. Drawing on the literature concerned with this subject we can assume that “the difficult student, in the behaviour he or she presents, either in a deliberate and intended, or not a fully conscious way, tries to boycott or in another manner thwart educational and didactic efforts of the school and teachers.”¹ However, from the educational point of view what is significant is that risky behaviours showed by such a student, if not confronted with an effective intervention of the people around him or her, consolidate and carry on a high probability of loss of health and life, or of social exclusion, as a result of failing to observe social standards of a given culture. Hence the issue of overcoming educational problems is of great importance for both the pedagogical theory and practice.

This article has been based on pilot research conducted in June 2005 in 13 randomly selected junior high schools in Szczecin. The respondents were headmasters, guidance counsellors and 83 teachers/form tutors. The nature of the research was diagnostic and the objective was to determine the manifestations, sizes and conditions of educational problems observed by the teaching staff of junior high schools. During the research the diagnostic poll method was used, within the framework of which the questionnaire technique was applied. As the research revealed a large proportion of students causing educational problems², an important question arises of how well the school is prepared to solve such problems, or in other words, **what the teachers' and form tutors' possibilities, expectations and needs are in relation to overcoming adaptation difficulties of the young generation.**

¹ J. Jagieła, *Trudny uczeń w szkole*, Kraków 2005, Published by Rubikon, pp.13-14.

² See Kupiec H., *Trudności wychowawcze w pracy z młodzieżą szkolną*, [w:] Żółkowska T.: *Pedagogika specjalna-koncepcje i rzeczywistość*, Szczecin 2005, Published by the University of Szczecin.

This article, due to its limited size resulting from adjustment reasons, presents only selected aspects of this complex issue. Namely, it focuses on seeking an answer to two questions which are so important when organizing support for the difficult students. First of all, what are the needs and possibilities of junior high school teachers in the scope of **cooperating with the difficult student's family**? And secondly, what are the needs and possibilities with regard to **trainings** that prepare teachers to work with the difficult youth? The research results presented herein were obtained on the grounds of answers to open questions set out in an original auditorium survey questionnaire.

While examining the possibilities at the disposal of junior high schools, the author first of all attempted to determine the scope of teachers' knowledge concerning the family situation of the "difficult student". This approach resulted from the fact that both the literature concerned with this subject, and everyday observation suggest that various sorts of factors existing in the family environment are an exceptionally significant correlate of risky behaviours showed by adolescents. It is important inasmuch as – when wishing to change the status quo which is disadvantageous for both the student and members of the society that surround him or her – the educational actions should be targeted at removing the causes of that status quo, in this case the causes being within the family. Hence we should agree with the opinion of Z. Ostrihanska that "The school should know the student. Knowledge of the student and his or her home situation should equip the teachers with an opportunity to better understand the child and serve him or her with more accurate assistance."³ Research results relating to this issue are presented below in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Scope of teachers' knowledge of the family situation of the difficult student

	narrow	moderate	broad	lack of information	total
Scope of knowledge of sociodemographic features of the difficult student's family	20.5% 17	8.4% 7	71.1% 59	- -	100% 83
Scope of knowledge of problems occurring in the difficult student's family	16.9% 14	66.3% 55	9.6% 8	7.2% 6	100% 83
Scope of knowledge of mothers' parental attitude	14.5% 12	65.1% 54	2.4% 2	18.1% 15	100% 83
Scope of knowledge of fathers' parental attitude	14.5% 12	59.0% 49	2.4% 2	24.1% 20	100% 83
Knowledge of educational methods applied by the difficult student's parents	28.9% 24	57.8% 48	6.0% 5	7.2% 6	100% 83
General scope of knowledge of the difficult student's family situation	10.8% 9	85.5% 71	1.2% 1	2.4% 2	100% 83

³ Z. Ostrihanska, *Losy uczniów nieprzystosowanych społecznie*, Lublin 1997, p. 60.

The distribution of variables presented in the Chart allows us to conclude that most teachers in Szczecin junior high schools possess only superficial knowledge of the family life conditions of students causing educational problems. This is pointed out by the highest proportion (85%) of teachers with moderate knowledge of their students' family situation. In turn, taking into account the fact that the distribution of the variable in the last line of the chart above was calculated by aggregating the particular variables presented above it, what is extremely significant is the advantage of teachers with narrow knowledge of the subject in question (11%) over teachers with broad knowledge (1%), whose familiarity with the subject was exhaustive. With a certain circumspection, we might interpret as another proof of the thesis put forward – particularly with regard to certain aspects of the family situation – the fairly high proportion of teachers who have never given an answer. This might precisely have been the result of a lack of such an answer.

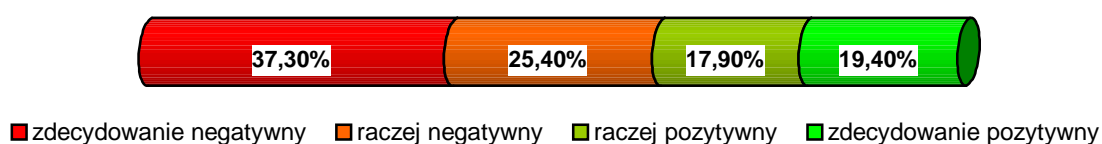
A more detailed analysis shows that the surveyed teachers are most frequently (71%) very well familiar with such sociodemographic characteristics of the families like: parents' education, family structure, number of brothers and sisters, and the employment situation of the parents. Nevertheless, much worse is their knowledge (this difference is statistically significant) of the problems existing in the family – which are an essential factor in the etiology of the socialization process disorders. Teachers most often point at the maximum of three problems (74% of the respondents), which include: pathologies in the family – alcoholism, violence (41%), single parent families – divorced parents (31%), and financial problems (26%) related to unemployment (23%). More rarely indicated are such phenomena as a lack of time for children (21%), a lack of control by parents (19%), wrong parental attitude (16%), or disorders in interpersonal communication within the family (11%), phenomena that require a more thorough understanding.

An even narrower is the scope of knowledge concerning parental attitudes of fathers and mothers of students causing educational problems. At the same time it is worth stressing that the differences observed in the distribution of both the variables are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.96$; $df=3$, lack of statistical significance), thus it can be assumed that teachers show a comparably equal lack of knowledge concerning the attitude of both the parents. The lowest knowledge, however, is presented by teachers in relation to the educational methods applied by the parents of students causing educational problems. It should be highlighted here that a large proportion of teachers in junior high schools (31%) use a misguided concept of the educational method and use it interchangeably with such terms as: mistakes in bringing children up, social pathologies, parental attitude, or style of education.

Moreover, as ways of parents' educational influence they classify bans (27%), disciplinary conversations (25%), corporal punishment (14%) or a lack of any reaction whatsoever to the child's improper behaviour (14%). Much less frequently indicated factors are awards (8%), or orders and requirements (6%). Of complete rarity, however, are such measures as avoiding or intensifying control of behaviours (4%).

Thus, the general conclusion can be that the scope of knowledge possessed by teachers (form tutors) concerning the family situation of the difficult student is insufficient, as a result of which the effectiveness of the potential or undertaken (mostly occasionally) correctional actions is largely reduced. The need for an intensification of contact between the school and the student's home is also confirmed by the teachers' assessment of cooperation with parents, whose empirical distribution is illustrated in Fig. 1.

rys. 1. Ocena współpracy z rodzicami uczniów trudnych

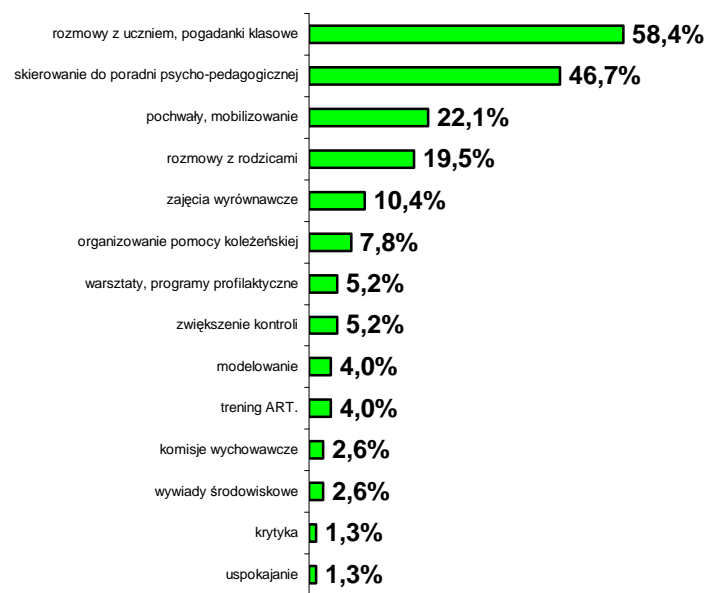


The distribution of this variable shows that over 50% of the respondents evaluate cooperation with parents negatively and expect from them increased involvement in mutual contacts that facilitate the solving of educational problems. The failure to cooperate is often the cause of, as most of the teachers agree, the low effectiveness of the educational efforts undertaken with regard to this issue. Nevertheless, it often happens that teachers expect the parents not so much to cooperate, as to solve the problems themselves, by believing that "upbringing children is mostly (which in practice frequently means "only") the responsibility of the parents, while the teacher cannot do much about it." Surely such a negative situation partly results from the style of communication between the school and the family. That is so because, as study results show, teachers most often limit their contacts to the telephone conversation (57%), or to the meeting at the school (45.4%). For a huge group of form tutors, an occasion to meet a child's parents is only the parents-form tutor meeting, which, as should be stressed, is held quite seldom (mainly twice a semester). Unfortunately, only a small number of teachers (13%) visit their students at home, which as we know creates a perfectly convenient way to carry out an in-depth analysis of the family situation, while an even smaller number of teachers maintain a constant contact with the parents (5.2%), which after all seems

to be a critical condition (especially in the initial stage) of the effectiveness of the correctional actions undertaken.

In working with the difficult youth, apart from cooperating with the parents, an equally important role is played by the fashion in which the form tutor interacts with the student. The Figure below depicts the methods used by teachers working with the difficult students at school.

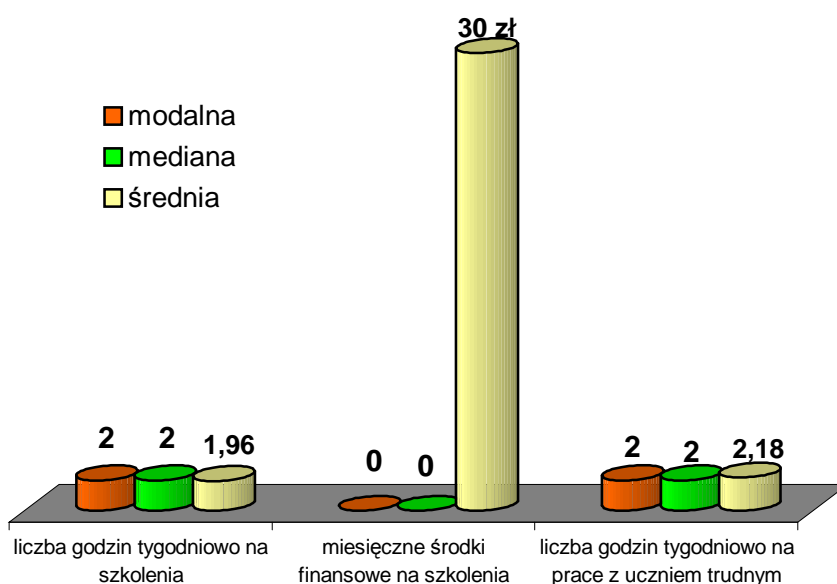
rys. 2. Wykorzystywane przez nauczycieli metody pracy z uczniem trudnym



The results obtained indicate that the students causing educational problems can mainly count on assistance in the form of a conversation (usually in the presence of the whole class) concerning his or her own behaviour. In practice, most of such conversations are concerned with the requirements that the student is unable to satisfy, or in other words with how the student should behave in a given situation, and not with guidelines on how he or she can achieve it nor what concrete assistance he or she can count on in overcoming the difficulties encountered. Otherwise, the student causing educational problems may be sent to the psychological and pedagogical counselling centre, as this is mainly what the school can do about it. Even when there are teachers who apply praising and encouragement to motivate students to improve themselves or teachers who resort to establishing contact with the parents, still the student is practically left on his or her own with the self-improvement work. Schools in which form tutors involve in running compensatory classes and perform well-thought-out and systematic workshop classes and professional preventive programs are a rarity. Thus it is

clearly seen that teachers neither have professional skills nor tools necessary in successful pedagogic work. Partial responsibility for such a disadvantageous situation in the education system is to be blamed on the teacher training system itself, in which the scope of knowledge concerning pedagogy and psychology is marginalized, and a training of practical skills in this field is missing completely, of which the teacher trainees themselves frequently complain. Hence a majority of teachers possess much higher teaching than educational competences. Consequently, we can assume that there is an urgent need for professional pedagogical teacher training of the skills in solving educational problems encountered when working with the difficult youth. The questions to be asked here are as follows: to what extent do the teachers themselves see this need and what costs are they ready to incur for its satisfaction? Answers to these questions are provided by the analysis of the data presented in Figure 3.

rys. 3. Deklarowane przez nauczycieli możliwości w zakresie pracy z uczniem trudnym



As the indicators of readiness to increase qualifications to work with the difficult student, the author has assumed the following: the weekly number of hours for specialist training, the amount of money to be spent monthly and the amount of time for individual work with a student a week.

Conclusions drawn from an analysis of the research material collected are the following: Teachers most often declare two hours a week of training necessitated by their work with the difficult student and as many hours for individual educational work with the student. Unfortunately most of the respondents (70%) do not intend to earmark for it any of

their own money, which they usually explain by too low earnings. The willingness to invest in improving the necessary skills is declared by the mere 30% of the respondents, who intend to pay for this an average of PLN 30.00 a month. Moreover, when taking into account the commercialisation of the training services market, all this poses a serious obstacle to organising professional assistance to both students and teachers. As a result, the data presented in the chart brings a sad conclusion that in spite of the undoubted need, there are scarce possibilities to use the teachers' potential in overcoming educational problems caused by a large proportion of the junior high school youth. This is a peculiar paradox, because it is the teachers' interest for such problems to be solved, without which the didactic process will be hardly successful at the best, if at all possible.

To summarize the arguments, it can be concluded that both with regard to the cooperation between the school and the difficult students' family, and to the organisation of trainings to prepare junior high school teaching staff to work with the difficult youth, there is a tremendous need and, unfortunately, poor possibilities in the school's and the local environment's own resources. Most teachers are not sufficiently interested in the educational conditions of the family environment. Surely a large group of them do not possess satisfactory knowledge concerning the factors and mechanisms that initiate and consolidate the progressing process of the students' social non-adaptation. Unfortunately, the "methods" teachers use in overcoming educational problems encountered when working with the difficult youth are, to put it mildly, anachronistic and barely professional. Hence their effectiveness, as teachers themselves repeatedly underline, is rather poor. From this point of view, what is comforting is the teachers' declared willingness to devote some additional time to work with the difficult youth and to receive training in this field. Concluding from the aforementioned, it is recommended that this potential of strength in teachers be used by organisations that are co-responsible for the education the next generations. And putting it in more concrete terms, the commune authorities are obliged to earmark additional financial resources for trainings, whereas researchers and employees of centres for teacher training and in-service teacher training are obliged to develop comprehensive programmes to equip teachers with effective skills in solving problems faced when working with students causing educational problems.

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