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Hampering the Access to the “Sensitivity Land”, Found at School by a Teacher-Practitioner

Sensitivity is the power of sensing positive stimuli, such as beautiful landscapes, or smells, or negative stimuli, such as for example unpleasant noise or hurting words of criticism. However, sensitivity also means being sensitive to others, that is the dislike to hurt others but also the urge to help them in difficult situations. All these features can be named by the term “empathy” (Davis, 2001). Psychologists believe that it is an inborn feature, thus very little susceptible to change, however life may verify this invariability in a positive or negative sense. A distinguished psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1979) did not consider sensitivity as a disadvantage, but a great advantage, as long as it serves the good of a man and of the people surrounding him, even if to some extent it brings suffering. It is worthwhile to ponder on the fact whether modern school can be treated as a place in which one tries to understand the sensitivity of a child and develops a great empathy?

Unfortunately, from the point of view of a teacher-practitioner, it is not so. A spontaneous sensitivity of a young person encounters resistance ... unfortunately from very often indifferent or even burnt out teachers.

According to such a teacher most obstacles on the way to achieve understanding and joyful cooperation in a school class result from the lack of ability to predict the consequences of activities by educators concentrated mainly on the will to obtain spectacular educational effects in a short time. Haste, the lack of consideration, occupational routine and pursuit for acquiring another professional level of promotion hamper the creation of appropriate relations between the teacher and the pupil. Unfortunately, more often an opinion is heard, that school lost its educational function and the aims assigned by the teaching staff concentrate mainly on education measured by the results of successive exams. Surely, as the sign of the times one can regard the lack of commitment of teachers in the work they perform and in consequence – treating by them with a great distance the understanding of work as a mission, vocation, and a special task in life. Teachers nowadays more often treat their work only and exclusively as a profession. The survey performed by GTC/Guardian/MORI proved that the longer the tenure of a teacher the lower his morale, whereas in Great Britain half of the teachers are over 45 years of age. It should be stressed here that in the years 2000-2001, 1/3 of British teachers retired prematurely (Woodward 2003). However, it turns out that even young teachers lose their enthusiasm for work very early (Curtis 2003a, 2003b). Teachers who started their work

with enthusiasm after several years of work begin to look round for a different profession. Young teachers are often deprived of a chance to discover their own professionalism (Woodward 2003). It is worthwhile to mention here that the crisis of a teacher vocation in modern Polish school is very interestingly described by Eugenia Potulicka (2003), who claims that “One of the main failures of educational reforms is the fact that decision-makers lack the awareness of the situation of the teachers” (p. 52) and “understanding their subjective world – phenomenology – constitutes the necessary condition for involving teachers in the change” (p. 52). The author proposes to treat school as an organization which is in the process of learning (Poland, as one of the not many European countries, is an inglorious exception), i.e. such a structure in which instead of a fragmentary individualism the unconstrained cooperation appears. According to the author „Organizations in the process of learning become one of the most powerful intellectual factors of inspiration for changes in education” (2003, s. 48). It should be added that many proposals of change in the structure of functioning of schools met, as a contradiction to the above mentioned attitude towards school as an organization in the process of learning, with a justified criticism (Prucha, 2003).

A question should be posed whether nowadays teaching is “business” only (let us add that not a very profitable one)? Or is it a “temporary” solution for those who at this very moment cannot find a different or a better method to earn money? Thus, keeping pace with the present day, should teachers treat work pragmatically as a business, and “impractically” as vocation? Or maybe, following Helen Groom (2003), we should use a sardonic definition: a temporary vocation.

Unfortunately the attitude of teachers described above, in whichever way we would try to explain it, hampers the understanding of children.

It occurs, that at form tutor periods teachers trying to catch up overdue material pass over the pupils’ problems in silence. They prefer to carry out another subject, e.g. Geography, than to focus on getting to know their pupils better, to evaluate their mutual relations, to help them solve possible conflicts, to diagnose home environment., etc. This way they hurt both, themselves and the pupils.

It may turn out in the future that the fact that they did not know the class team makes conducting a lesson quite impossible.

A teacher loses the ability to interpret the child’s reaction in an appropriate way, what in consequence leads to the lack of understanding and unwillingness to cooperate. And thus, a kind and talented schoolgirl becomes a vicious and quarrelsome girl, who can only mock the

teacher's remarks, and a well-mannered boy becomes a provocative and belligerent mugger. It should be stressed that the changes presented above do not take place overnight. Usually it is a long-term process developing as the result of experiencing difficult situations in family life, social life or among peers.

Appropriate reaction, help shown on time to a lost child can to a great extent eradicate the effect of negative experiences. It brings advantage to the pupil himself, his family, as well as the teacher, who this way will eliminate improper behavior of the pupil, because he will be aware of their etiology and thus will more easily cope with choosing the counter-measures.

Regardless of the type of the institution in which the teacher is employed, his work should be based mainly on scrupulous analysis of information acquired by means of: community interview, functional diagnosis, observations, meetings with parents, consultative meetings of all specialists working with a child at school. It is worth mentioning that these activities must be carried out systematically, and not, as it usually takes place in many education institutions, once a year. Meetings of groups of therapists, educators, psychologists, who have classes with a given pupil, should be performed in a reliable and scrupulous way. It is not enough to meet once a semester and express a formula: „a pupil does not cause educational problems...”. The purpose of this type of meetings is the analysis both of the progress and the child's difficulties, even if at the beginning they seem insignificant. During the consultation specialists should determine a common model of proceeding of the teaching staff towards specific pupils. Thanks to that it will be possible to eliminate situations when one teacher contradicts another, what in consequence results in disorientation in a life of a pupil and his family. Unfortunately, it results from educational practice that in some educational institutions, meetings of the so-called „teams” are still treated as an unpleasant obligation and a waste of time. Also the course of the Board of Teachers' meetings leave much to be desired.

The classification meetings of the Board of Teachers should include: the exchange of experiences concerning the work with class teams, a presentation of methods for overcoming educational problems occurring during class with a specific pupil (or a group of pupils), jointly defined guidelines upon the educational-psychological interaction. Teachers have to realize that multi-aspect knowledge of a pupil, his virtues, achievements, preferences, as well as weaknesses, shortcomings, limitations and personal problems, will facilitate their work and lead to satisfaction from their profession and a feeling of fulfillment. Therefore, the time

saved on shorter meetings of the Board of Teachers and consultative meetings brings apparent and short-lived advantage only.

A teacher who tries to combine the role of a mentor with the role of a child's friend is able to achieve better results with him in the field of knowledge and education. It is extremely essential, especially in the case of children who are very sensitive about their position in school environment.

Educators complain about the lack of time and overloaded material of school programs. However, in many cases the problem of a pupil does not require extraordinary intervention in extra time but a short conversation during a break, during duty hours on a school corridor. Instead of a casual talk with a colleague-teacher about a political situation in the country it is worthwhile to ask a pupil why he is sad sitting in a corner, or whether in his opinion anyone in the class is in bad mood that day and it would be good to cheer him up, or to give positive comment about a hairstyle of a schoolgirl. Acting this way an educator makes his pupils feel that they are treated as partners and their problems are not underestimated. He gives a chance to the counteraction of emerging feeling of alienation and isolation among the teenagers, who did not establish satisfactory relations with adults.

The emergence of the feeling of isolation at older pupils is greatly affected by the family, bad relations in a peer group, as well as unsettled contacts with a teacher (Rembowski 1992). It should be stressed that children also feel isolated as the result of using towards them educational and didactical methods based on posing targets which are impossible to achieve due to the predispositions and abilities of pupils. This signifies a good ground for complexes and inhibitions (Kościelak 1996). Thus, the necessity to observe more closely the pupil as well as his psycho-physical conditions of his development, abilities and likings.

The research of Ryszard Kościelak (1996) emphasizes significant differences in the feeling of isolation of youth who are intellectually fit or those who are disabled. The frequency with which the phenomenon of isolation occurs is two or three times greater in the case of pupils with mild intellectual disability. Unfortunately, unsettled family environment from which these pupil mainly come, still intensifies negative experiences.

Some teachers believe that children in an intellectual norm do not require such intensive intervention of an educator at shaping adequate social norms or help and spiritual support, as intellectually disabled pupils. In their opinion they are parents who mainly should introduce models of righteous behaviors and affect the formation of decent system of values,

and the role of a school is limited only to continue these activities. Nothing more erroneous ! Every child, regardless of the level of functioning and intellectual development, needs the same attention, support and empathy, both at school and outside of it. This is confirmed by the research carried out by Katarzyna Stefanowicz-Zawiszewska (2005), who proved that shaping moral sensitivity is equally affected by family, local environment as well as educational institution.

Apart from that, it should be borne in mind that pupils do not always receive in family homes appropriate models of behavior and school is for them very often the place where they can get to know socially accepted norms and the rules of conduct.

Due to that, the role of a teacher-educator must also include the cultivation, by one's own example, of conduct based in clearly defined moral rules.

It is worth to emphasize that most inappropriate behaviors of pupils at school is conditioned by a feeling of fear.

In the opinion of Irena Obuchowska (1964) the fear of failure at school is the cause of disorders in psychical functioning. Due to extremely high demands posed to a pupil, as well as strict evaluation and mocking, the results are: the decrease of self-evaluation, expectation of an inevitable failure, the feeling of threat, fear and in consequence the discontinuation of activity. It results from the research conducted by Irena Obuchowska (1983) that the fear of failure negatively affects child's adaptation to school. Pupils, who fear achieve results below their ability, are not favored by peers, show hostile attitude to teachers, what leads to the situation when the teaching staff consider them insubordinate and do not favor them.

Whereas the research of Ryszard Kościelak (1996) show significant differences within the range of feeling the fear in the case of youth who are slightly intellectually disabled and their peers who are within the intellectual norm. The level of fear experienced by pupils mildly disabled is higher than in the case of pupils who have appropriate intellectual development.

The results cited above suggest the necessity to verify of teachers' attitude to the methods of teaching and education applied by them. It turns out, however, that the fact that a child misbehaves during a lesson may have the background connected with fear and belittling this situation by an educator favors the emergence of interpersonal conflicts.

Therefore, it is right to resign from repetitive lessons based on inquiring a pupil at the blackboard, and summarize the material in the form of: puzzles (prepared both by a teacher

and pupils), rebuses, crosswords, board games, subject games, staging, pantomimes, wordplays and brainstorming sessions. By this the teacher will limit the situations which are stressful for a child at school and thus facilitate the life for himself, the pupil and his parents.

It is sad to notice that adults make many mistakes towards children as a result of tactlessness. It happens that children are treated as „invisible” to the environment. Teachers or parents comment their way of speaking, behaving, moving, their progress at school directly in their presence, leaving them out from the conversation. During such a discussion adults seem to forget that a pupil (whether intellectually fit or handicapped to a lesser or greater extent) can differentiate very well who is the subject matter of the meeting and very often feel awkward while hearing their evaluation. Nobody likes to be publicly criticized ! Therefore, it should be taken into consideration whether it is right to conduct conversations the purpose of which is the exchange of opinions concerning the development of a pupil in his own presence. Moreover, during an inspection or sample lessons it happens that a teacher at the presence of all the pupils tells the visiting party about a specific pupil, determines his abilities, reports failures, shares the information about the status and social position of the pupil’s family. Such a situation is clearly the result of tactlessness of an educator (Michalski 2000). In extreme cases it can even lead to neuroses, feeling of suffering and complexes. Unreliable behavior of a teacher who publicly reveals issues embarrassing to a pupil favors the increase of antagonisms in a peer group what constitutes one of the causes of the isolation and unwillingness towards school.

In this context it is not surprising that present children try to make their way in the world which seems to live only in the present. There is no great enthusiasm and zeal for the future. Also the attitude of teachers may prove that (Mańkowska and Tatala 2005). A significant task in this aspect is “to return the feeling of hope to the young people, to show them the possibility to strive for the good” (2005, p. 38). Piotr Szczukiewicz (2005) explains these changes in the range of values of the youth by inappropriate upbringing, where there is ambiguity of values and the moment of becoming an adult becomes a caricature of that which used to be before. Thus, the lack of clear guidelines from the older generation or extremely hedonistic guidelines (for example mammonism) becomes a trap especially for the youngest people.

To summarize the above deliberations, a dominant role of a teacher in the process of shaping appropriate relations in school environment should be emphasized. Every person undertaking teaching and educating young generation must remember about the necessity to develop one’s own methodological workshop both concerning the substantial issues as well as ethical values.

In relations with a pupil it is worthwhile to be guided by empathy and respect of his individualism. Moreover, one should show understanding for the generation discrepancy and give the pupil a chance to feel accepted.

These are the signposts to the „sensitivity land”... .

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