

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES OF FUTURE PUPILS OF THE 1ST YEAR OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract. *Despite many works concerning school maturity in Poland, there are only few that focus only on emotional aspects of social behaviours of children who are to start school education. Interest in this issue started increasing when educational authorities announced lowering the age of compulsory education. Majority of available studies concerns evaluation and abilities of children referring to their cognitive possibilities. Although they are very important for the children's further development, the reasons for success are rather related to emotional and social intelligence. This article presents the research results concerning socio-emotional competencies of future pupils of the first year of primary school. Pedagogical observation comprises children from two years remaining at preschool before starting school education. The goal of the study was to present social and emotional state of the 6- and 7-year-old children after cancellation of, so called, "six-year-olds law".*

Keywords: *social and emotional competencies of children, concepts of school readiness and school maturity, interpersonal skills, school age.*

Introduction

Celestyn Freinet wrote in his dissertations: *"Be careful with innovations. Do not look for them just because they are new, but rather due to improvement they can bring to your work. And the improvement depends on you to the same extent as on the innovation. In the new clothes you will not feel really good if you do not make it your own by fitting sizes, movements and lifestyle. The new, beautiful, strong shoes will not be useful before you get worn in them. Just after some time, shorter or longer, depending on type of the shoes, their shape and sensitivity of your feet, the shoes will fit to you to such an extent that nobody can wear them so comfortably. But even though, when you sometimes come from a far journey, you will be glad to put on your old shoes to allow your tired feet to relax..."* (Freinet, after: Lewin, Semenowicz, 1976: 91).

In many European countries (and all over the world) children start school education at different age. In some of them, like for example Luxemburg or Ireland, just four-year-old children start school education and six-year-old children are subject to compulsory education. Just as in other states of the

European Union, including Poland, after years of attempts of educational authorities, compulsory education was implemented for six-year-old children. Education was obligatory since the 1st September 2015 – then so called “six-year-old law” entered into force. The issue of appropriate age to start school education divided many social groups and educational authorities. The school year 2015/2016 became the last year of obligatory school education for the six-year-olds. On the 29th December 2015, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland banned the “six-year-olds law” and introduced changes. Their main assumption was the removal of compulsory education for six-year-old children (however, parents had the right to send their children to school at the age of 6 years) and increasing the age to start school education to 7 years beginning from the school year 2016/2017.

Emotional-social intelligence and general intelligence are not totally independent and there is feedback between them. Following this approach, it is possible to conclude that during the development of children it is necessary to take care of development of their general intelligence as well as their abilities to create emotional and social intelligence. Simultaneous focusing on shaping of all types of intelligence will allow children, young people and then adults to function more effectively and happily in personal, professional and social life.

Some authors claim that social and emotional skills are more important for child’s success than cognitive intelligence (Goleman, 1997; Goleman, 1999; Goleman, 2007; Albrecht, 2007). What is more important, they claim social and emotional intelligence can and should be developed in all phases of development. It is possible to teach a child how to initiate and sustain friendship, cooperate in a group, cope with aggression of other people, solve problems and conflicts in a constructive way, keep self-confidence in difficult situation and many others.

Research report

The issue of this study seems to be important as far as the implemented changes are concerned. It is an attempt to present results of the research focused on teachers’ opinions concerning states of social and emotional development that determine readiness to start education. Even though the age of starting school education has been changed due to social transformations and changes in educational law, it may constitute a reflexion on the presented issue.

Research strategy was determined by the nature of the examined object and the goal of the study. After analysis of methodology of many authors, the research practice was based on methodological concepts of T. Pilch and T. Bauman (2010), which was applied to collect and analyse the empirical material.

The research was conducted at the turn of April and May 2017, at the end of children’s stay in preschools in Częstochowa, Poland, Silesian voivodship. Observations comprised future pupils, that were children who completed

preschool education and those who were “withdrawn” to preschool group (six-year-olds). The goal of the study was to define and evaluate emotional state of seven-year-old children who completed annual, compulsory preschool education and six-year-old children who could (with parental consent) start school education. It focused on 214 children. In this group there were: 120 seven-year-olds—(58 boys and 62 girls) and 94 six-year-olds—(51 boys and 43 girls).

Based on the concepts of school maturity, studies over psychological and pedagogical literature, Polish, foreign and own pedagogical experiences, the following research problem was formulated: *As far as social and emotional development is concerned, do the 6-year-old children differ significantly from the 7-year-olds to start education in the 1st year of primary school?* Due to the complexity of the main problem, following specific problems were defined to determine the subject of the research: *P-1: How was pro-social attitude and openness of examined children? P-2: How was contact and cooperation with peers? P-3: How many children take initiative and leadership in a group? P-4: Did the children comply with social norms and rules in a peer group? P-5: Could they control their emotions? P-6: Was the awareness and expression of emotions noticeable in their behaviour? P-7: Could they deal with difficulties and problems? P-8: Did age and gender of the children determine state of their development?*

Two scales were worked out: SSD (Scale of Social Development – pro-social attitude and openness, contact and cooperation with peers, initiative and leadership in social contacts, compliance with social norms) and SED (Scale of Emotional Development – control of emotions, awareness and expression of emotions, dealing with difficulties). Below there is a brief presentation of the spheres of development that were analysed.

Pro-social behaviours are the ones that are to benefit other person or community. The condition for occurrence of pro-social behaviours is appropriate interpretation of situation: noticing the need (of other person), recognizing it is possible to meet the need, recognizing own responsibility. There are several sources of pro-social behaviours: emotional state triggered by other person (empathy), internalization of norms that requires acting for the benefit of other people, creation of personal relationships (friendship, empathy) and treating other person as autonomic value; the sense of relation with other people may be generalized, which means it may refer to very wide circle of people or to people in general (Aronson et al., 1997). Pro-social behaviours depend also on one’s values, level of moral development and self-esteem of an individual. There were environmental and cultural differences observed in terms of readiness to pro-social behaviours, their forms and motives (Reykowski & Kočańska, 1980, Reykowski, 1986). In order to achieve personal objectives, people rarely face a situation when achieving the objective depends only on the efficiency of their

personal activity. Achievement of the objectives depends usually on other people or groups. In such situation, we deal with interdependence of interests: own activity influences not only personal objectives, but also determines chances of other people to achieve their objectives. There is also a reverse dependency: other people's actions influence possibilities to achieve individual's objectives. Diverse child's activity and continuous contacts with peers help the child to internalize basic social norms of cooperation in a group and teach them joint action in particular situations during play or work. Competition and cooperation are the basic factors that form the sense of community with other children. However, care should be taken not to make competition an egoistic stimulation or a group abandon, but to make it a stimulus to unify efforts into solving tasks that are important for particular group. Various types of situation during interpersonal contacts verify behaviours of participants of these interactions.

Peers have equalizing and normalizing influence on a child. They can stimulate the child's activity and involvement in undertaken actions, but they can also suppress boundless imagination and "bring the child back in line". However, the peer group is more accepting for the child than adults. It was proved by Janusz Korczak, when he said: "The world of adults does not understand and even does not want to understand or tolerate child's experiences, ideas and individuality." (Korczak, 1998: p.21). Results of numerous research show that the individual wins social position in informal structure within particular year in the school thanks to his or her own personality traits and attitude he or she adopts towards other members of the group. An important factor determining child's social position in a peer group is also family situation, in particular relationship with parents. "A child surrounded by kindness, warmth and affection has a positive social experience. The child learns to perceive people as a source of positive experiences and a basis of security. Thanks to that, the child develops kind attitude towards other people" (Sendyk, 2001: p. 56). Thus, the child who is loved and accepted in home establishes friendly relationships very easily and is accepted by other people beyond the family, for example by the peer group.

The transmission of norms and values is an important element of cultural continuity of the society and its development. However, the issue of values is so important and complex it is difficult to frame a unify structure of the value. From the ethical point of view, it is an established norm, generally accepted principle of behaviour, a directive that obliges to particular behaviour in particular situation through invoking appropriate moral assessments and values. M. Argyle perceives norms as "common models of perception and thinking, same ways of communication, interaction and appearance, common attitudes and convictions and common ways to make the same what the group is doing" (Argyle, 1999: p. 219). One of the most important regulators of social life are moral, social and cultural norms, that are principles defining how a member of particular

community or group should behave. Convictions regarding values are acquired when the person lives in a social environment. In the case of a child, it is family home, groups of peers, closest environment, social institutions. Values are significantly related with biological, psychical and socio-cultural needs.

Non-compliance with established norms has serious consequences for an individual. Norms are a form of adaptation to external situation – defence against a threat – and they are also a form of adaptation to the group. They regulate sphere of life, which is obligation – “*what should be done*”, standard of behaviour (“*stay within some borders*”) and technology of behaviour–“*how it should be done*” (Jankowski, 1980).

Norms are principles that are transmitted to children from generation to generation and are connected with adopting appropriate attitude toward particular situation. Even though they are inherited from the family, values are also subject to change. As a result of acquisition of social experience the hierarchy of value, relations with the world and its interpretation change at different periods of one’s life.

The process of shaping moral autonomy is gradual and long-lasting. Between two extreme stages of heteronomy and autonomy there are also middle stages. So, in early school age the child is still at the stage of moral conformism, which means the child acts usually according to parents’ and teachers’ requirements for fear of punishment for breaking their prohibitions or expecting rewards for submission and obedience (Piaget, 1967). The family is a school of social life, the space for learning how to initiate contacts with other people. Simultaneously, it gives examples of interpersonal relations. The way of referring to the environment in social contacts of the child is a faithful reflection of the patterns provided by his or her parents. The child adopts also a system of norms of behaviour from parents, that is awareness, which features are positive and expected and which are wrong and undesirable. In the conditions of family life the child may be introduced to complying with many various norms, valuable and worthless. Many norms that are implemented by the family, has a social nature, for examples norms referring to helping other people, kindness and the like. Hence, it is important to adapt oneself for the functioning in a peer group to comply with the bans, orders, all regulations and duties and accept and comply with the group arrangements. It has been assumed that the determinant of this category may be the attitude to duties, performance of orders, as well as acceptance of criticism from other people. It was also assumed that feeling of guilt and willingness to submit to punishment can be an indicative of the beginnings of internalization of behaviour. In addition, the symptoms of anger and aggressive behaviours associated with it may prove that children are not aware of socially approved imperatives.

In social contacts there is often a need to suppress the expression of emotional states. Whether or to what extent an emotion is expressed is determined

by many factors. “Apart from culture, the type of an emotion and social situation are important” (Łosiak, 2007: p.158). Suppressing expression of emotions is often defined as control of emotions, which is a basis for functioning of every society, in particular as far as negative emotions are concerned. It is one of most basic emotional competencies. Development of emotional competencies, in particular the ability to control impulses, is crucial for the child’s development. Only a child equipped in skills that enable dealing with emotions will be able to adapt and function in the changing world.

Children manifest different behaviours depending on situation they are in and the stimuli they experience. Depending on the environment the child functions in, some different norms may apply that have to be respected and various consequences may exist. The level of emotional control is differentiated depending also on age. Significant role is played by acquired experience, therefore the scope of child’s competencies changes with age. This means the emotional reactions are influenced by the events from the previous stage of ontogenesis, as well as the situations the child experienced before. Various circumstances shape the child's emotional sphere, so the child enters each new stage of life with a specific set of learned skills.

Emotional awareness is a basic drive for changes in life. Talking about emotions is the most direct way to understand and control them. The cerebral cortex – in other words, the thinking brain – causes we can transmit our feelings to other people and then observe and draw conclusions from the way they react. Teaching children how to understand and express emotions will influence many aspects of their development and their success in life. Whereas, when we do not teach children to understand and express emotions, they will become susceptible to conflicts caused by other people (Shapiro, 1999). Ability to communicate emotions with words plays crucial role in fulfilling basic needs of the child. The words that describe emotions are connected with feelings. Talking about, for example, experiencing anxiety while thinking about something unpleasant, causes immediate connection between the centre of speech and emotional brain, which results in subtle physiological reactions related to anxiety: slight acceleration of heart rate, increase in blood pressure and body tension.

When children are six year old, their thinking part of the brain is fully developed, so talking about all shades of particular emotions should not be very difficult for them. They can describe their emotions by the use of pictures and metaphors. Thanks to developmental programming, the children can talk about feelings, but the ability to do it depends significantly on their upbringing and relationship with parents and peers. The skill to talk about feelings and fluency in the language of emotions has its origins in childhood. Learning how to recognize and express own emotions is an important part of the process of communication (Nazaruk, 2016; Nazaruk, 2017) and also an important aspect of emotional

control. However, understanding of feelings is also an important skill, in particular for building fulfilling relationships. Children should be encouraged to verbalize their feelings. It will help them to solve conflicts and problems.

Comparison of the SSD and SED level for 6- and 7-year-old children

In the year preceding school education, all the children in the last preschool group are subject to preschool diagnosis, which should be performed twice a year – the first one at the turn of October and November and the second one between April and May. Each teacher can use any tool for the diagnosis. In the presented research, the author used own observation sheet, where SSD and SED included particular emotions, feelings and social behaviours (28), which were the desirable and undesirable for the child to start learning in school. As it was mentioned above, they were divided into particular categories, which were used to evaluate two years from the last preschool groups. The scale was constituted by the degree of intensity of observed affective behaviours: definitely yes (3), rather yes (2), rather no (1), definitely no (0). Those behaviours that were considered undesirable were reversed (revaluated).

Table 1 Comparison of SSD for children from two years (average results)

category of SSD	girls		boys	
	6-year-olds	7-year-olds	6-year-olds	7-year-olds
pro-social attitude and openness	2,8	2,5	2,4	2,5
contact and cooperation with peers	2,3	2,7	2,6	2,8
initiative and leadership in social contacts	2,1	2,5	2,8	2,8
compliance with social norms	2,6	2,2	2,4	2,6

data source: own research

As indicated by the data in the figure above, there were no significant differences between children at the age of 6 and 7 years. Examined six-year-old girls achieved higher results than their one year older friends (pro-social attitude and compliance with social norms). In two other categories the average results slightly differed in favour of the 7-year-old girls. On the other hand, the boys were rated at the same level, with a slight upward trend in the seven-year-olds.

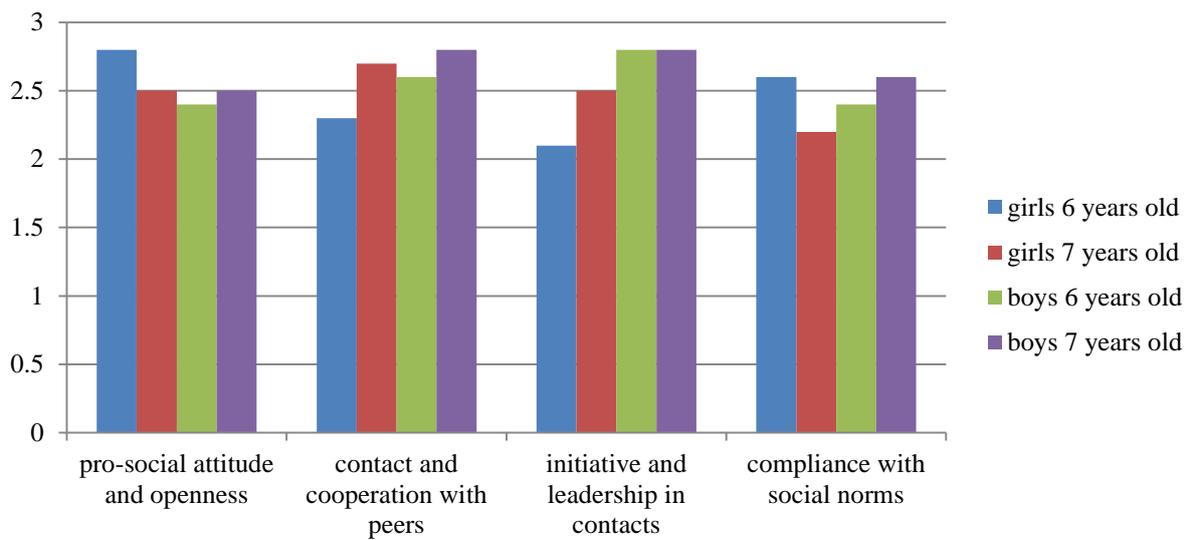


Figure 1. Evaluation concerning the level of SSD – average results

Table 2 Comparison of SED for children from two years (average results)

category of SSD	girls		boys	
	6-year-olds	7-year-olds	6-year-olds	7-year-olds
control of emotions	2,1	2	1,9	2
awareness and expression of emotions	2,4	2,6	2,1	2,4
dealing with difficulties	2,6	2,8	2,3	2,5

data source: own research

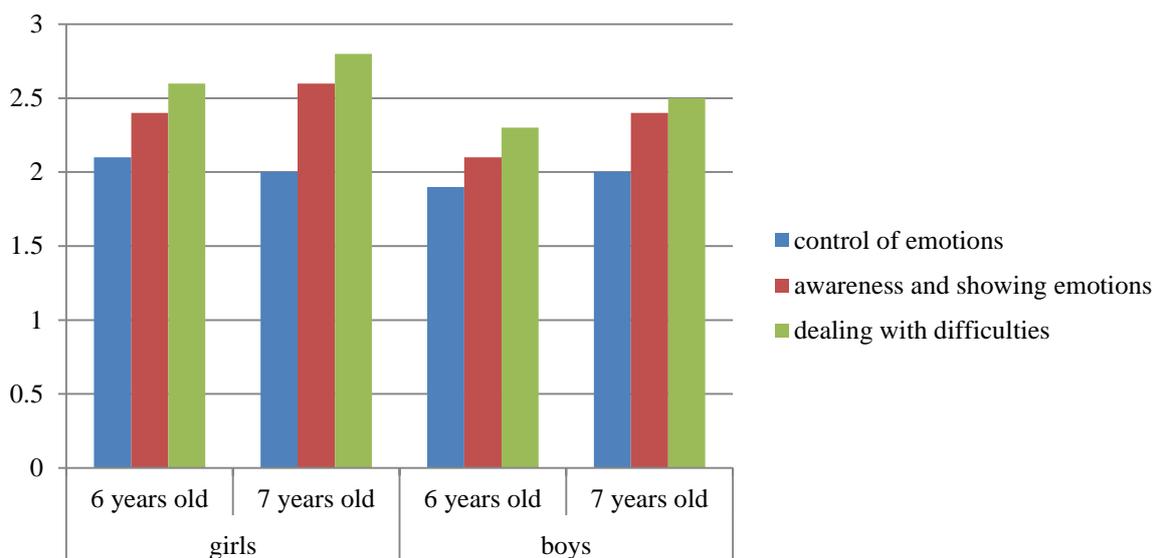


Figure 2. Evaluation concerning the level of SED – average results

Analysing the scale of emotional development, all examined age groups achieved the lowest average results. The ability to deal with difficulties were rated the highest, which might indicate that children had developed strategies and acquired experiences within the scope of overcoming problems.

Conclusions

The research confirmed that the answer to the question regarding the research problem: *Do the 6-year-old children differ significantly from the 7-year-olds to start education in the 1st year of primary school?* cannot be unequivocal. Detailed verification of the hypotheses is necessary, which provokes deeper and more profound conclusions.

The level of social development of children completing one year preschool preparation (both 6-year-olds and 7-year-olds) analysed in terms of pro-social attitude and openness, contacts and cooperation with peers, initiative and leadership and compliance with social norms was so high that it could confirm school readiness of the 6-year-old children. It means younger children “waste their time” in preschool, as they could be successfully subject to compulsory education.

The level of emotional development (of 6-year-olds and 7-year-olds) in terms of control of emotions, awareness and expressions of emotions and dealing with difficulties indicated lack of their full readiness and maturity to start education in the first year of primary school. This deficiency was noticed especially in skills regarding control of emotions.

Does it mean contemporary children in the second decade of 21st century are “bored” in preschool when they are 7 years old? Has the preschool become a “golden cage” for the 6-year-old children? Shouldn't the children from 6 year of age be given a chance (after meticulous psycho-pedagogical diagnosis) to become pupils in the school?

There are many such questions and only few activities of educational authorities, associations and parents (for examples: www.ratujmaluchy.pl). The awareness of the environments closest to children is still low in Poland and the “comfort” of sending children to preschool and explanation “*do not take childhood away from children*”, “*the age of 6 is time for play, not for learning!*” and the like are wrong directions of thinking.

Play has accompanied people from the dawn, from childhood to old age and it is not in conflict with acquiring or expanding knowledge. Conflict of these interests lies, probably, in good core curricula, programmes of teaching adjusted to age, broad knowledge of teachers about child psychology as well as in the reality and chaos in education – constant educational changes are not good for children. There are no programmes of emotional education from an early age in

preschools. The real direction of change is education of parents (although today it sounds archaic), help in upbringing and giving discreet tips. The family home of the child plays a significant role in this respect, but also the teachers of initial education should be people who have a vocation to be a teacher. They can make their contribution by exploring and knowing the structure of emotional processes. Then they will support the development of children's thinking about emotions, give tips to deal with emotions and impulsiveness and prepare the children to anticipate reactions of other people consciously. Currently in pre-school and school education the attention is focused mainly on strategies of developing child's mind, disregarding the strategies of emotional education. It should be remembered that emotional education should start from the birth of a child. Preschool and school period should be its continuation and an important stage, when children's thinking about emotions should be improved and modified. Perspective of pedagogical activity, according D. Goleman (1997), should aimed at subordinating emotions to chosen goals of an individual, which helps to enhance his or her adaptation to all living conditions.

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