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OPINIONS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN ON CAUSES OF PEER REJECTION OF YOUNG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

A child during his or her school years is a main initiator of social interactions with their peers. Affiliation, appreciation and friendship determine high level of one's sense of security. Fulfilment of these needs facilitates gaining experience, increases social and cognitive activity and empowers one's creativity. Being rejected or laughed at by peers that one meets five days a week dramatically lowers self-esteem and leads to improper emotional, intellectual and social development (Chodkowska, 2004; Deptuła, 2007, 2013; Musialska, 2011).

Escaping the label of rejected child is very hard, especially when this situation goes on for a long time. It requires exceptional effort and particularly favourable changes in the group and is possible only through special pedagogical interventions (Urban, 2012). When trying to help the child being rejected by their peers, we should focus mainly on factors that cause their situation.

STUDENT FACING PEER REJECTION

School is the primary place where a child meets their peers. During first years of education children learn about interests, needs, values, skills and behaviours of their peers in various situations, which helps them build their own social identity (Polak, 2010). They tend to provoke friendly or hostile situations partly to experience affiliation and fellowship, but also competition and rejection. That is why they create groups that often see one another as rivals and make up enemies, just to have someone to oppose to (Enderlein, 2001). They try to measure their own value through relations with their colleagues. It may induce the sense of social privilege and high sense of one's value or sense of deprivation and low self-esteem (Turowski, 2001).

A class consisting of peers also serves as a reference group. Despite being organized for didactic purposes and functioning in specific school and environment, it is often further divided into non-formal fellowships which serve important developmental

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roles. Students of the same class are also members of groups outside of school. This groups are characterized by spontaneous creation and voluntary participation. Their integrity is based on mutual values, needs and interests or respect for the same set of rules (Winiarski, 2010).

Typically, at creation, a class is a group of strangers. Social bonds, friendships and likings develop over time. Nonetheless, it is understandable that conflicts and intrigues might appear as well. Aside from formally assigned roles and norms, there are also uncontrolled, spontaneous stimuli (Łobocki, 1985). The standards indicating one's position in a class structure are defined by physical properties or character traits.

From developmental needs perspective, children upon creating groups, pairs and friendships have to reject someone to strengthen their bonds. When seeking friends, they look for people that feel close, similar. Therefore, those who are not similar are rejected and become background for group bonding traits (Enderlein, 2001).

If a child is not meeting the requirements or does not have the sense of behavioural rules, they become labelled as different and not fitting the group. Even though a child physically and formally stays within a group, they do not experience positive bond with their classmates anymore. They keep the lowest position in the group. They are not allowed to interact with others and not given a chance to change their situation. In consequence, they are forced to constantly experience negative reactions from group members. The lack of acceptance, being rejected to play with others or sit with them the same school desk induces the feelings of failure and humiliation. Similar emotions accompany them when a teacher tries to assign them to a team and its members loudly oppose or use mimicry to show how unwanted he or she is. What is more, rejected children are unable to escape the rejection, as the place where they are being rejected is also a place where they receive education.

When a group of colleagues perceives a child as unworthy of acceptance, he or she starts to perceive themselves as such as well. This negative approach towards them influences their further development and can be defined as peer rejection (Ladd and Troop-Gordon, 2003, after: Ambroziak and Kieszkowska, 2012).

Peer rejection manifests itself as multiple attempts to control and subject, exaggerated defiance, overall harassment and violence, where harassment is defined as repeatedly exposing someone to negative treatment by a child or a group of children (Deptuła, 2013). Peer rejection represents the negative opinions about someone from all or some of their peers. It can also serve as an indicator of social incompetence. At the same time, peer acceptance and sociometrical popularity indicate social competence (Musialska, 2011).

It should be noted that rejected children and ignored children are the two categories of students being unpopular in a peer group. The difference between them is that rejected children are actively pushed away, while ignored ones are sociometrically inert. They are disliked and stay on social margin of the group, but they are not harassed (Kulawska, 2013). Rejected children are often judged negatively and rarely

positively, which makes them disliked in a class. They are unable to interact with their peers, as many of them manifest improper, destructive behaviour. They tend to be antisocial and aggressive towards other children. Meanwhile, isolated children are being ignored, avoid interactions and rarely point out their rights (Schaffer, 2006).

FACTORS DETERMINING REJECTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

It is commonly believed that rejection is caused by socially unacceptable attitudes and behaviours, as well as pejorative interpersonal relations in a peer group (Bierman, 2004). This process starts with particular behaviour or characteristic of a child that does not fit what is represented by other group members (Kita, 2015). This is associated with four types of behavioural problems (Urban, 2009, p. 98-99):

- narrow scope of prosocial behaviours;
- significant level of aggression;
- increased inadvertence and immaturity;
- high level of anxiety – avoidance.

According to Thomas M. Achenbach's theory – children that initially manifest aggression, are more likely to develop externalizing behavioural disorders (poor control of one's behaviours), whereas initial signs of withdrawal and anxiety may lead to internalizing disorders (over-controlled behaviours) (Ambroziak and Kieszonkowska 2012; Urban, 2000; Kita, 2015).

All types of behavioural disorders lead to social maladjustment and manifest in eight symptoms:

1. withdrawal – obsessive avoidance of social interactions during childhood and puberty,
2. somatic symptoms such as headaches and abdominal pain,
3. anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts,
4. social problems caused by breaking group norms and the lack of predispositions for peaceful way of resolving problems,
5. thinking disorders,
6. attention deficit,
7. aggression,
8. criminal behaviour.

Coie and others (1990, after: Kulawska, 2013) distinguished four indicators of *vicious circle of rejection* one falls into at its initial stage and stays in for a long time. Consequences of the lack of acceptance are noticeable even in their adult life. First of them are social behaviours of children that become unpopular. Community

assigns them low value which leads to rejection. A group reacts negatively to aggressive behaviours in particular. Acceptance in peer group is also determined by physical appearance, learning achievements and age of the child (Świdarska, 2010; Kosiorek, 2010).

Another factor that regulates one's relations with their peers is his or her perception of their social status. If a rejected child is aware of their position in a class, he or she may attempt to modify it and develop the sense of autonomy. In contrast, when aware of being rejected, but at the same time feeling powerless, a child abstains from taking any action, which solidifies their disadvantageous position. Rejected children show the lack of awareness of social relations in their peer group. Yet another cause of rejection is puerile conviction of social success or failure associated with locus of control. The initial rejection makes the child feel aversion for their peers (child knows that their being rejected) or makes them associate low social status with being completely controlled by external factors.

Rejection might also be caused by group norms and stereotyping mechanism. A group needs a target of rejection to set limits of acceptance and to get the sense of unity. For the sake of group cohesion, the rejected child plays the role of a scapegoat (Musialka, 2011). The rejected one is deprived of a chance to learn social skills and competences. At the same time, he or she might be pushed away into the zone of influence of deviant, subcultural groups and ones not complying with social rules. Chances for changing this situation are determined by child's ability to learn social skills by interacting with other groups. The one that might compensate for effects of earlier rejection and enable improvement of their social status.

Peer rejection might also be caused by the difference in interpersonal awareness of a child and its peer group. Being able to understand others helps to identify their social situation. In case of delayed decentration, the child does not acquire this ability and cannot establish and maintain interpersonal relations (Deptuła, 2013).

Very important factor that regulates one's peer relations is emotional contact with their parents. It is their responsibility to shape the attitude of trust by allowing externalization of emotions without the fear of humiliation, in atmosphere of acceptance and recognition. Deficit of support and sympathy by parents makes child suspicious, distrustful, hostile to others and introverted, which often results in social maladjustment (Niebrzydowski, 1979).

Summing up, we are able to distinguish following factors of peer rejection:

- social behaviours manifested by a child upon losing popularity;
- child perception of their own social status;
- puerile conviction of success or failure (locus of control);
- group norms and stereotyping mechanisms;
- difference in interpersonal awareness between a child and their peer group;
- emotional contact between a child and their parents.

Knowledge of group mechanisms and behaviours determining peer rejection might help recognize early symptoms of this phenomenon by teachers and educators and increase the chances for successful interventions and facilitate support for children experiencing isolation.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In order to collect information about causes of peer rejection in early education classes and to direct their social support, the survey has been conducted in school year 2014/2015 in school complexes no. 19 and 21 in Bydgoszcz. The survey was aimed at students of second and third grade of primary school and their parents. Sample consisted of 130 respondents. Among parents it took a form of a questionnaire, while among children a form of an imagebased test (Wilczyńska, 2015).

Specific research tasks were put into questions about:

- interpersonal awareness (emotional competence – adaptive coping with unpleasant emotions and acceptance of experienced emotional states, ability to identify emotions of others and naming them; social competence – ability to establish and maintain contact, to negotiate and solve conflicts, to cooperate, accurate perception and understanding of social situations),
- family conditions of child development – upsetting, explosive discipline, poor control and engagement, inconsistent discipline, stiff and crude discipline, child-parent bond without proper care, need recognition, parental conflicts,
- school environment – a class, teacher's attitude, educational process organization,
- child characteristics (physical, behavioural differences, learning problems, character traits, participation in informal groups),
- group mentality – identification or denial of Beane's statement (2009, after: Musialska, 2011): 'a group needs a target of rejection to set limits of acceptance and to get the sense of unity'.

Considering specifics of conducted research and child's perceptual and interpreting abilities, the students provided information regarding only the first research problem.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Gathered data shows that 85% of students would not invite an aggressive child to play with them. Other neglected groups include children dealing with ADHD (43% of answers), as well as the ones being timid or distrustful (38% of answers). Ethnic minority was not a cause for reluctance of making contact or maintaining it.

Likewise, parents of the children pointed out aggression as the main cause of peer rejection (62%), timidity and distrustfulness (38%), as well as appearance and clothing (29%). In their opinion being a part of ethnic or religious minority is the smallest problem for creating interpersonal relations (respectively 2% and 3% of answers).

Among emotional competence, as much as 63% of parents pointed out inability to cope with unpleasant emotions as the main cause of peer rejection. Among social competence – 62% chose inability to solve conflicts as the most common reason of rejection. Second most chosen answer was inability to negotiate, make and maintain contact (54%). Among family conditions, most of respondents (75%) chose inadequate educational practices. 42% of them point out upsetting, explosive discipline which manifests itself in using orders, hits, shouts, threats and expressing negative, humiliating opinions about the child.

According to 54% of parents, classmates have the strongest influence on interpersonal relations of a child in school. Among them, they see the main source of rejection empowering. Many of parents (40%) underline the role of the teacher in strengthening or limiting the above situations.

Those who identified themselves with the statement: *a group needs a target of rejection to set limits of acceptance and to get the sense of unity* (31%), justified their choice using phrases such as *common goal unites people, integrates a group, empowers them, gives them a sense of being better than the rejected child, weak personalities are scared of breaking from common mindset, as it might put them in the rejected position, often the sense of unity comes from a person that has the strongest position in a group and this person directs the rejection*. Justification of this attitude included also the fear of being different. A group rejecting what is unknown will unite and keep the sense of security. Some of the opinions pointed out that these justifications are also used to isolate a group from a sense of guilt caused by rejecting someone.

23% of respondents disagreed with the statement. Those who included explanation on their choice pointed out that *it might set the limits of acceptance, but certainly won't unite the group*. I suppose they thought about the whole class, which consists of all students, no matter if they get the sympathy of other members or not. Other respondents noticed that *rejection depends on character traits of the group's leader*. If the leader does not have a tendency for rejection, other group members will not find the reason by themselves. Yet another opinion stated that *intimidators cannot empathise with the one being rejected, therefore they do not know how this person might feel*. They do it to *build a group hierarchy*.

Many of the parents mentioned that the group shouldn't keep together by negative factors. They wrote about tolerance and setting those positive goals that could strengthen the group's unity. In their opinion it is their role, as well as the role of teachers and educators, to promote this way of thinking. They believe *a group is able to develop without rejection if emphasis is put on seeking of what members have in common*.

It is worrying that as much as 46% of adults taking part in this research did not engage in discussion on this topic at all. It is coming to light how low is their level of interest in organizational process of creating conditions for proper development of their children.

CONCLUSIONS

Social rejection might serve as an indicator of disorders in one's development. Early recognition enables quick intervention and organization of effective support programs for children that have not been accepted by their peers. Most of all we should observe children that manifest aggressive tendencies as, according to students' answers, they are the most likely to be rejected. Subsequently our focus should move to children with ADHD. The risk of their rejection was also mentioned by Musialska (2011).

Surveyed students have also pointed out that they would not invite to play the children that are distrustful or timid. This problem is associated with child's social and emotional competence (cf. Deptuła, 2013). In this area, we should focus mainly on child's ability to cope with unpleasant emotions and to solve conflicts, as well as to cooperate by inviting them to participate in workshops or trainings that would enable them to build satisfactory relations with their peers in school environment.

In order to prevent peer rejection and to support the ones being rejected we should also inform parents about good educational practices. According to respondents' opinion, upsetting and explosive discipline might significantly increase the chance of peer rejection occurring in the school environment.

The research has also shown that it is necessary to examine teacher's attitude and interpersonal relations between classmates, as they might strengthen or prolong peer rejection. Although rejecting one or few children might bring unity to a group and help them set limits of acceptance, it is teacher's duty to cooperate with parents and find a different goal for achieving unity; the one based on seeking what group members have in common; the one that gives every child in a class the sense of security and fulfilment.

Among so young children it is possible for parents to organize small groups of several children, which could meet under parental control (e.g. small club of interests or birthday parties). There is a need for coordination of children's behaviour by focusing on strengths of their colleagues, so they could perceive them as added value for a group. If adults could help them recognize those characteristics and benefits, children might gain from interaction with one another and increase the limits of peer acceptance. Goodwill, mutual trust and engagement of parents and educators is crucial for achieving this goal.

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OPINIONS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN ON CAUSES OF PEER REJECTION OF YOUNG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Keywords: peer rejection, child's social position, peer group

Abstract: The goal of the research conducted in school year 2014/2015 among young primary school children and their parents was to collect information about reasons of peer rejection and to learn how to support the ones being rejected. Escaping being labelled as a rejected child is very hard, especially if this situation goes on for a long time. It requires exceptional effort and particularly favourable changes in a group. It is possible only through *special educational interventions* (Urban, 2012) and high engagement of parents.

PRZYCZYNY ODRZUCENIA RÓWIEŚNICZEGO DZIECKA W MŁODSZYM WIEKU SZKOLNYM W OPINII RODZICÓW I UCZNIÓW

Słowa kluczowe: odrzucenie, pozycja społeczna dziecka, grupa rówieśnicza

Streszczenie: Celem badań sondażowych w roku szkolnym 2014/2015, przeprowadzonych wśród rodziców i uczniów klas początkowych, było uzyskanie informacji dotyczących przyczyn odrzucenia dziecka przez grupę rówieśniczą oraz wyznaczenie kierunków jego wsparcia społecznego. Pozbycie się etykiety dziecka odrzuconego jest bardzo trudne, zwłaszcza jeśli taka sytuacja utrzymuje się długo. Wymaga to z jego strony nadzwyczajnych wysiłków oraz wyjątkowo korzystnych zmian w obrębie całej grupy. Jest to możliwe jedynie dzięki *specjalnym interwencjom wychowawczym* (Urban, 2012) i zaangażowanej postawie rodziców.