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THE IMPACT OF LOWERING AND RAISING THE SCHOOL AGE AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTHY CHILDREN, AS WELL AS CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

A FEW WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

Adoption of a chosen topic stems both from a professional interest in the situation that is faced by the teachers of younger grades to legislative changes, as well as a personal concern for the fate of children affected by changes made in the system of schooling for both the six-year and seven-year-olds.

The talk about the presence of a six/seven-year-old child in school covers broad social circles, meanwhile, people involved in it, unfortunately, do not always understand the needs of the child. These needs are pushed into the background, and the widespread protests of parents, supported by the teachers, are not taken into account by the education authorities in introducing changes retaining the school readiness of children.

Changes and regulations for educational reforms should be widely consulted, not only at the human resources level but also on the social one, as they are concerning our intellectual pillar, our children, who will most severely receive the effects of all changes in educational reforms. In my opinion, the fact that the teaching staff of Polish schools have higher education and is generally prepared and aware of the changes, means very little. Constant consecutive systemic changes in education lead to instability and lack of feeling safe and of constructive work for the children starting school.

One should not forget also about the preparation of educational institutions for enrolling – in one year – of the six-year-olds; and in the second year – of a seven-year-olds in the first grade. This problem considers both, school organization, as well as substantive issues, the scope of the program content, pedagogical-psychological knowledge about child's development and how to group children according to various criteria, as well as combining younger and older groups. Social awareness of these issues is vague because the supply of information to a wider audience is blocked, and

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the education authorities do not listen to the voice of society, and above all, the voice of teachers and parents.

Therefore, one should, for example, take into account the results of reports from 2006, *Six-year-olds in Poland*, drawn up before the previous educational reform (by the previous government), because its results remain valid even today, and can help draw important conclusions from the study of changes in school readiness.

THE ISSUE OF SCHOOL READINESS AND NEEDS OF THE CHILD

The socialization of the child takes place mainly in the family environment and is associated with the child's psychophysical development. The literature defines the concept of development as "the process of occurring in a given subject of specific quantitative and qualitative changes" (Okoń, 2004, p. 68). In psychological terms, development is understood as a long-term process of formation of internal structures that reflect reality, as the process allowing to make changes leading from the lower forms – simpler, to the higher and more complex ones (Brzezińska and Trepka, 2000). Przetacznik-Gierowska and Makiello-Jarza write that "human development is characterized by changes with a definite direction, that is, they lead to giving the individual more and better balance with the environment, to improve the forms of regulation of their relationship with the environment" (2003, p. 23) and so, therefore, they have the character of progressive changes.

In addition, Bogdanowicz says that higher mental activities of man, their behaviour and actions are implemented with participation of complex assemblies of the interacting brain structures at different levels of the brain, that is, with the participation of all three functional blocks. Each of them contributes to the implementation of the entire functional system, which is the act of writing and reading (2000, p. 31). Kilm-Klimaszewska raises this issue in her book, writing: "during mental development improvement of the ways of reflecting reality, reacting and influencing the events surrounding the child, by functional structures becoming highly organized" (2011, p. 41).

The entire development process is affected by genetic factors and environmental ones, as well as inherited psychological predisposition. Psychological science distinguishes several trends in human development. Erikson is the author of crucial research, as he states that there is the interdependence between internal instincts and social influences (2000). In his extensive elaboration, he singles out eight stages (from the one- to the sixty-year old man), under which the solution of eight crises takes place, when a variety of contradictions accumulates. In relation to children aged 1-12 years, he recognizes the following stages (Erikson, 2000):

- the first year of life – *a crisis of confidence and mistrust*: shaping the attitude of the child to others and to the world; the task is to develop an attitude of trust (or distrust);

- second and third year of life – *a crisis of autonomy or self-doubt*: education a sense of autonomy and independence in action; acquisition of skills of locomotion and manipulation, which allows for the discovery of the possibility of free choice;
- five years of age – *a crisis of initiative or guilt*, followed by the development of motor skills and ability to communicate with the environment, a positive solution to the crisis is to achieve one's own initiative;
- to the age of twelve – *the crisis of establishment or guilt*: in the case of a positive solution appears in the child characteristic of industriousness.

On the other hand, in his own theoretical framework, Piaget distinguished, two general stages in the development of the child between one and seven years (1966):

- the first two years of life – *sensory stage*: the child learns the world through perception and motor activity, over time, there is memory and language; the intelligence of the child at this time is a practical intelligence;
- from the second to the seventh year of age: *preoperative stage of thinking*, that is, the stage of specific and imaginative intelligence: there is the ability to think symbolically, develop mental images, images of objects and phenomena; between the sixth and seventh years of age, operational thinking appears, that is, the ability of the mind that enables the recognition of reality from two points of view.

This is the period of concrete operations, the child is able to apply the law of transitivity and organize specific objects of any relationship, because this is the time of development of the basic concepts that teach logical thinking. The child in this period, learns to understand and remember a lot of concepts of conservation of mass, weight, and also distinguishes parts from the whole and shapes the understanding of numbers, especially integers.

Mental development of a young child is associated with the development of cognitive processes and regulations, which is why psychology examines the development of the child in terms of its psychophysical development (Bogdanowicz, 2000), where the concept of psychomotor development is understood as a process of development (series of progressive changes), in which motility is closely linked with the psyche (the totality of cognitive and emotional-motivational aspects). Strelau and Doliński write that the concepts of *change* and *development* are often used as replacements and the concept of development is identified with the notion of progress (2016).

Bogdanowicz (1981) states that developmental psychology, as a result of many years of research, has developed the characteristics of psychomotor development of children in different periods of development. It provides the patterns of normal development, with which one can compare the child tested, to determine whether the present level of development typical of most children in this age is similar, so that it develops normally. According to Klim-Klimaszewska “changes in mental develop-

ment are revealed in the form of more efficient operation and better orientation in the surrounding world, as well as higher forms of adapting to different situations in which the child participates" (2011, p. 42-43).

Motor development, as well as other areas of human development, characterized by large individual variation, is conditioned by many causes and, therefore, caution should be exercised in the interpretation of such results of tests of physical fitness in children and adolescents on the basis of established norms for chronological age (Przetacznik-Gierowska and Makiełło-Jarża, 2003).

Of substantial impact on the overall development of the child are shaping roles in the family. A major impact on the form they relate to each other, ways of behaving of the family members, lies in family organization. The process of shaping the roles, also forms the adaptation attitudes of the individual family members in certain periods of life. The child identifies particularly strongly with parents in early childhood, in the schoolchildren this is still big and falls only between 11 and 12 years of age of the child (Sołowiej, 1980).

The child's relationship with the loved ones is so important that the family is most important in the socialization process by which a small child becomes an adult human being, a person prepared to participate in society. Socialization is subject to environment, both parents and educators' approaches, as well as unintended actions, interacting through the people with whom the child resides, situations in which it participates, or events that occur in its presence or that it hears.

The influence of the family environment is the most conscious educational work, but it can also have unintended impacts, some impacts less valuable or unfavourable to its development. The parental attitude influences the child as a result of the emotional side of parents towards the child and the one expressed in words and everyday activities. Kukołowicz emphasizes that today there is a new category of dysfunctional families, which is associated with unemployment, but also the temporary absence of one of the parents (trips for work, often abroad), sometimes trip of both parents and leaving even a small child in the care of grandparents or other members of the family (2001, p. 58).

The attitude of parents towards the child in the early school age, especially in the first year of school, is often due to the attitudes of mothers, for example. the severity of mother's emotions, anxiety and anger, the sound and quality of voice; lack of acceptance for types of child play, meddling in the play; while there exists no such relationship regarding the attitude of the father (Ziemska, 2009). Positive relationships between parents and children contribute to the development of the ability to focus attention on children and progress and better performance in school, and the prevailing pressuring attitudes of parents raise similar behaviour in children, and certainly causes their resistance.

The needs of children during their development are manifold, of course, tailored to the age and capabilities. At the age when a child enters a new environment, which is a school, the needs are more focused on specific psychological

and social skills development in the child. Socialization also takes place through the peer group.

SCHOOL READINESS AND SCHOOL MATURITY – DILEMMAS

School readiness is primarily related to the pedagogical sciences, although in recent decades the intense interest in this problem is also visible among psychologists and sociologists. Literature understands school readiness, primarily as the emotional, mental and social maturity, which allows the child to perform its duties at school. Needed are therefore: the appropriate degree of sensitivity of the child in relation to its interest in school and the ability to comply with the demands of a teacher, school regulations, and above all, the ability to live together with peers.

School readiness is understood also as an achievement of the child's level of development of mental, emotional and physical aspect, which allows them to participate in school life and master the curriculum content of the first grade (Okoń, 2004). It is, therefore, "the process and the effect of interaction of the child's activity and the activity of adults, creating the conditions for learning, as a result of interaction of properties and characteristics of the child's school" (Wilgocka-Okoń, 2003, p. 23). It is possible to present the determinants that child should reach to be able to meet the demands of the school. These concern the following areas of functioning:

- physical and motor development, an area of precise hand movements;
- general knowledge and orientation in the environment;
- communication skills to such an extent as to permit communication both with peers and with teachers;
- emotional maturity, or ability to rule over one's own emotions;
- the conflict-free operation in the group;
- ability to take actions that are aimed at achieving a particular goal.

School readiness is the result of biological development and learning and gaining experience in a variety of social, emotional and motor aspects. It is also a dynamic process of individual progress, in which equally important are the determinants of hereditary and environmental nature, as well as activity and psychophysical predispositions of the child. These views on school readiness show that it is dependent on several factors: emotional maturity, social competence, self-reliance and resourcefulness, ability to adapt to the new situation (Wilgocka-Okoń, 2003). These factors include not only the child's personality, but also adults who need to create the right conditions for learning for the child.

The concept of school maturity is related to the preparation of the child for school duties, which allows them to start learning and contribute to their success in school. Essential elements of school maturity are: physical, intellectual, social and emotional

maturity. Since the start of school is associated with important changes in life, school readiness should be defined as a state of mental development related to the development of intelligence. School readiness is thus formed essentially by two factors: the process of maturing and learning, so as to indicate the appropriate age of starting school, which led to the creation of the concept: social maturity.

HOW TO CREATE A PROTECTIVE SHIELD FOR CHILDREN

Diagnosis areas of child development in terms of school maturity require interdisciplinary research, as required is, among others, knowledge of medical, psychological, pedagogical and methodological area. The readiness of the child to go to school is subject to a variety of contemporary research. Thus exist, inter alia, the screening tests for children aged 4-7, and for children over the age of seven (Blythe, 2013).

Today, pedagogy, taking the problem of lowering the compulsory school age, may turn to the theory of multiple intelligences. Theory of Gardner (2002) on the subject, indicates the assumption that intelligence is the bio-psychological potential, which allows for the processing of specific forms of information in a certain way, the intelligence of every person is the sum of eight separate intelligences. They are not arranged in a relationship of superiority and inferiority, and develop depending on favourable conditions. These are:

- Linguistic intelligence – the ability to make effective use of language, both in the oral and written form;
- Logical-mathematical intelligence – the ability of logical reasoning and inference, also for the smooth execution of operations on numbers;
- Visual-spatial intelligence (spatial-visual) – the ability to orientate in the position and direction for imaging, sensitivity to colour, shape, size;
- Kinetic intelligence – the ability to experiment by movement, gesture, and the ability to respond quickly, coordinating movements;
- Musical intelligence – the ability to sense rhythm, the ability to respond quickly;
- Natural intelligence – the ability to recognize and classify plants, animals, minerals, to understand natural phenomena and experimentation;
- Intrapersonal intelligence – the ability to understand oneself, to monitor and evaluate one's own behaviour;
- Interpersonal intelligence – the ability to understand the intentions, motives, emotions of others.

The dominance of one or more of intelligences has no effect on the others. That is why in one child the advantages in e.g. spatial, linguistic and interpersonal intel-

ligence can be observed. Such advantage decides on better school performance in periodic range, e.g. faster learning, learning by doing. Despite some innate makings, each intelligence can develop in favourable conditions (Gardner, 2002). The theory of multiple intelligences emphasizes how important is the individual approach to the educational needs of each child.

As a response to the current changes taking place in the Polish education the concept of multi-intelligent education for children was proposed, including children in preschool and early age (Kopik and Zatorska, 2011). The assumptions of this concept include: exploring the potential of each child's learning needs and capabilities, capacity building, development of interests, triggering ingenuity, creativity and intrinsic motivation to knowledge. In order to implement the concept of multi-intelligent education, as well as recognition of multiple intelligences, it is necessary to carry out appropriate diagnosis, because it allows to determine the state of development of the child, their skills and basic characteristics of behaviour (Włoch and Włoch, 2009). Given the arguments for lowering and raising the school age, in my opinion, first of all the individual needs of the child must be considered. We cannot put all the children in one lump, as their development proceeds in quite different conditions and other factors affect the ability of the child towards education.

In a situation which is created by a new reform in education, the children are in a very uncomfortable environment overall. Until recently (2009-2013), there was discussion about the compulsory schooling of children of six-years-old, while research reports on a six-year-olds in school gave very different results. This is widely discussed on the website of the Institute for Educational Research (www.ibe.edu.pl) where published research reports may be found. In short, they discuss how the six- and seven-year-olds thrive in kindergarten and first grade. Reading the results of the reports, it can be said that the level of competence achieved by children is not dependent on the age at which they go to school (six or seven years), but on the form in which they learn. Therefore, one should think about what to do to protect children from the effects of the coming changes in education, to aid in the entry into the school environment, to answer social needs of both six- and seven-year-olds.

Looking at it from another perspective – a parent or guardian, after all, we see that the school does not give children assistance to help in difficult situations. Hardly anyone sees how different the teaching in kindergarten and the first grade of primary school is. It seems, therefore, that by taking another attempt to change the age of school readiness again, it is forgotten about the regularities of development of children at the age of six and seven. In effect, the proper readiness assessment, taking into account the issue of emotional and social sphere, was not created. Thus a *protective shield* should be given to this sphere: self-reliance, resourcefulness, willingness and ability to establish contacts with peers, easy orientation in a new environment, emotional stability and discipline and ability to live together in a team.

A major role in this task falls to the child's parents, because they do not always attach importance to these same abilities, skills, and messages as teachers. The de-

velopment of a child at this age is characterized by the desire for knowledge about the world and the need for new experiences, but keeping in mind that spontaneous desire to learn is not synonymous with a readiness to go to school.

These factors count more in ensuring the success of the child at school, than verbal ability to analyse, synthesize, and syllabise or skills of learning signs, symbols and characters. Considering the fact that between the sixth and seventh years of age operational thinking appears, that is, the ability of the mind that enables the recognition of reality from two points of view (Piaget, 1966), we need to protect children in this crucial period and provide good conditions for learning. Accordingly, how should a parent act? They should:

- strengthen themselves,
- not be affected by the wave of criticism against the changes,
- tame own fear of change,
- arrange a place to learn for the child,
- show interest in the work of the child,
- teach respect for the work,
- positively set themselves on every level of education,
- help by positive motivating of the child,
- assist in triggering the activity of the child.

In light of the foregoing it is necessary to raise the issue of adaptation to changing conditions of education of the children with disabilities and special educational needs. The needs of these children are, unfortunately, often on the margins of considerations concerning the educational changes. Meanwhile, such children are particularly vulnerable to the difficulties in adapting to the school environment. That is why it is particularly important to protect children with disabilities, and thus:

- create additional time to adapt to the new environment,
- organize workshops, open classes for children and parents,
- create new places available for children with disabilities in customized benches,
- set up tables to learn in a circle,
- ensure the availability of teachers for a disabled child at any time,
- require the employment of support teachers and assistants to help,
- prepare special areas of tranquillity available during the breaks,
- allow immediate consultation with a psychologist in difficult situations,
- remove architectural barriers from school.

In the school, unlike in kindergarten, the child confronts different requirements. They concern the basic duty – learning, attitudes towards peers, appropriate behav-

our in the classroom and at school, also towards various adults, observance of rules, more complex than those in kindergarten or in the family home.

When a child is ready to independently cope with everyday situations, when it has the support of their parents, all new school requirements do not constitute a threat to them, but they are a positive challenge that strengthens and promotes development. With the support of parents, but also a teacher in the first grade, the child can experience something exciting and overcoming the obstacles can become a way of building self-esteem and self-confidence.

It is therefore important that the key is in the positive attitude of parents and children starting school, regardless of whether they start it as a six- or seven-year-olds. Meanwhile, the ongoing reforms, changes and their withdrawal, interfere with the conviction of the parent (and by proxy of the child) about school readiness. and also about the legitimacy of starting school at a certain age. Already in May 2013, in the *Letter to the parents of six-year old children*, Brzezińska (2013) from the Institute of Psychology, University of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and the Team for Early Education at IBE in Warsaw, gave tips to parents and wrote what every parent should do before their child went to school:

- visit the school to which the child would have to go;
- show the school to the child, not necessarily during the open doors event, make a tour of it, help them get used to the new place;
- if necessary, talk to the school counsellor or teacher about your concerns, get directions, remember that it is not the parents who goes to school, but their children;
- do not equip the child with fears and concerns, the child wants to know that they can rely on their parents, who believe in their abilities;
- intrigue the child with the school.

These advice remains relevant in the context of re-changes in the education system and can help build a protective shield for a child who enters a new school environment, regardless whether it is six- or a seven-year-old future pupil.

CONCLUSIONS

The article addresses school readiness in children, discussed in the context of current educational changes. Considered is the issue of the lack of consistent long-term countering of the effects of (re)conducted educational changes. The need to create protective measures for children in this difficult period of transition is articulated, so as to help children, teachers and parents in a difficult situation of school adaptation. The case is made for the creation of a special *protective shield* for the children, referring to the concept of development based on multiple intelligences, with particular

emphasis on social development and intro- and interpersonal intelligence, as theorised by Gardner.

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THE IMPACT OF LOWERING AND RAISING THE SCHOOL AGE AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTHY CHILDREN, AS WELL AS CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Keywords: educational system, adaptation, school readiness

Abstract: In the article the author discusses the aspect of school readiness of children in the context of changes in the educational system. The analysed problem consists in the lack of consistent long-term countering of the effects of conducted educational changes. Presented are the arguments for the creation of the *protective shield* discussed in the article for the children in these special conditions of education. She also points to an important issue of needs of the children with disabilities and special educational needs in the area of adaptation to changing conditions of education.

WPŁYW OBNIŻANIA I PODWYŻSZANIA WIEKU SZKOLNEGO W KONTEKŚCIE ODDZIAŁYWAŃ NA DZIECI ZDROWE, Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIAMI I ZE SPECJALNYMI POTRZEBAMI EDUKACYJNYMI

Słowa kluczowe: system edukacji, adaptacja, gotowość szkolna

Streszczenie: W artykule autorka omawia aspekt gotowości szkolnej dzieci w kontekście zmian w systemie edukacyjnym. Analizowany jest problem braku konsekwentnego długoterminowego przeciwdziałania negatywnym skutkom przeprowadzonych zmian edukacyjnych. Przedstawione są argumenty przemawiające za utworzeniem omówionego w artykule specjalnego *parasola ochronnego* dla dzieci w tych szczególnych warunkach edukacyjnych. Wskazuje się też na istotny problem dzieci z niepełnosprawnościami i specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi w obszarze adaptacji do zmieniających się warunków edukacyjnych.