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# Teacher—Parent Relationship in the Implementation of Supportive Activities

Relacja nauczyciel—rodzic w realizacji działań pomocowych

## ABSTRACT

A person is defined as a social, relational being. According to Sławomir Chrost, “a human being is not a product, but, as a person, he/she is, in a way, immersed in social structures” (Chrost 2020: 155). Numerous definitions in the fields of theology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology emphasize the value of relationship which is the basis of society and the driving force for human development and education. This article concerns the supportive relationship between the teacher and the parent, which is fulfilled in the educational space and focuses on varied educational and developmental needs of students. The characteristic features of the relationship result from its dualism: on the one hand, formal and legal provisions, and, on the other hand, the personal dimension of the relationship viewed from a humanistic perspective. The aim of the article is to analyse the teacher-parent relationship in terms of selected issues: the model of helping, the teacher’s attitude, as well as techniques and tools used at particular stages of the support process, using literature from the field of psychology, counselling and pedagogy.

## KEYWORDS

education, student, parents, school, relationship, support

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

edukacja, uczeń, rodzice, szkoła, relacje, wsparcie

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## ABSTRAKT

Człowiek definiowany jest jako istota społeczna, relacyjna. Zdaniem Sławomira Chrosta, „człowiek nie jest produktem, lecz jest już jako osoba niejako zanurzony w struktury społeczne” (Chrost 2020: 155), na co wskazują definicje z obszaru teologii, filozofii, psychologii, socjologii. Akcentują one wartość relacji, która jest podstawą społeczeństwa i motorem dla rozwoju oraz edukacji człowieka. Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy relacji wspomagającej/pomocowej między nauczycielem a rodzicem, realizującej się w przestrzeni edukacyjnej, której przedmiotem są zróżnicowane potrzeby edukacyjno-rozwojowe uczniów. Specyfika relacji podyktowana jest jej dualizmem: z jednej strony rozwiązania formalno-prawne, z drugiej osobowy wymiar relacji ujmowany z perspektywy humanistycznej. Celem artykułu jest analiza relacji nauczyciel–rodzic w aspekcie wybranych zagadnień: modelu pomagania, postawy nauczyciela oraz technik i narzędzi stosowanych na poszczególnych etapach procesu pomocowego z wykorzystaniem literatury z obszaru psychologii, poradnictwa i pedagogiki.

## Introduction

The history of education shows a close relationship between the school and society, economy, politics and religion, all of which influence on the process of education and approach to the local environment. The idea of cooperation between the school and the family began in antiquity (Greece, Rome) and continued in subsequent historical periods. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a widespread conviction that effective education should involve both environments: the school and the family. This was the essence of upbringing guides of the time, such as *Family and School*, or *Upbringing at Home and at School*. The scope and forms of such cooperation were the subject of public discussion. The turbulent changes of the 1990s highlighted the need to perceive parents as an important partner for cooperation with the school (Lulek 2008: 54–58). A significant expansion of the space for both parties to be active in this respect appeared in legal provisions (e.g., the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, the Act on the Education System of 1991, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child).

Currently, the school cannot develop without conscious and active participation of parents; their contribution to shaping the atmosphere that facilitates development and building democratic attitudes is particularly important. The contemporary school should aim to strengthen the role of parents under a partnership model through involving them in teaching, educating, caring and helping/supporting activities. In the field of education, helping is a category that is often referred to the students who, for various reasons, require supportive actions. These are undertaken by teachers in a way that is directly targeted at the student and indirectly, through specific actions, at parents/guardians. The supportive relationship<sup>1</sup> between a teacher and a parent is fulfilled:

- at the educational level, which is related to the provision of information and reliable knowledge;
- at the therapeutic level, which includes calming emotions and tension;
- at the psychodidactic level, which includes shaping educational and relational skills.

In understanding the specific features of the relationship between a teacher and a parent, it is worth referring to the publications by Thomas Gordon (2004) and Jeffrey Kottler (2005) in which the authors show the determinants of the helping process and point out the need to develop the skills necessary to support another person and be there for them. The term “relationships with people” is the foundation for interpersonal contacts, hence the need for an in-depth analysis of the topic from a theoretical and practical perspective. The goal of this article is to show selected aspects of the teacher-parent relationship, while touching on the issues related to supporting the student in the educational process.

## Relationship and support in the interdisciplinary approach

As I have already mentioned, both terms: *support* and *relationship*, are found in social sciences, and their definition is determined by the specific features of a given discipline. In the sociological approach,

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<sup>1</sup> In the article the terms: “supportive relationship” and “helping relationship” are used interchangeably.

relationship refers to the interaction between people who occupy different social positions and perform different roles in the society. As Piotr Sztompka notes, “interpersonal space is filled with a variety of social relationships” (2012: 124). In psychological terms, a personal relationship is a condition for human development and social functioning. The pedagogical understanding of a relationship emphasizes its role in the processes of teaching and upbringing. It is in and through relationships that a person is formed cognitively, socially, emotionally and spiritually. Moreover, relationships are necessary for the fulfillment of human needs such as the sense of security, belonging, recognition, respect, and self-fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> Metaphorically speaking, a person’s life is a network of relationships that define and shape his/her existence. Different types of relationships are part of this network: family, peer, professional, and partnership ones, and such relationships form a broad context for the person’s individual and social development. A person enters into planned relationships, i.e. those which result from his/her own choice and personal need, and into unplanned relationships, which result from his/her social and professional roles. The process of building relationships depends on the person’s attitude towards themselves as well as towards others, which is connected with acceptance and self-acceptance, but also with their abilities and needs. Relationship building is a process which involves people, places and space.

According to the dictionary definition, help is: “action, support (both in the tangible and spiritual sense) to relieve someone’s effort, or to rescue someone in danger or in a difficult situation” (*Słownik języka polskiego* 2001: 95). According to Alicja Czerkawska, “we consider the following words as closely related: helping, rescuing, protecting, guarding, defending, serving, listening, supporting, comforting, and being together” (Czerkawska 2013: 103). In the approach of Alicja Kargulowa, helping is defined as “supporting someone physically or morally; a type of action, activity or behaviour that is distinguished by the altruistic goal towards which the helper is aiming” (Kargulowa 2006: 206).

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<sup>2</sup> The educational and developmental needs of students should be understood as a variety of needs resulting from individual properties of development and the individual’s personal potential, which fits into the model of inclusive education addressed to each student.

Helping is analysed and defined in terms of aims and objectives, and seen as an activity that enables people to make changes (Mur-gatroyd 2000: 16). In the vast literature on the subject, we encounter various theories that attempt to explain the concept of helping on the grounds of many academic disciplines: biology, sociology, psychology or philosophy. Thus, we can refer to biological concepts related to Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, to Daniel Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, to the social exchange theory, to the theory of egoism, or to the theory of diffused responsibility. Helping others improves self-esteem, allows one to experience joy and a sense of purpose in one's life, deepens one's relationships with others, and increases one's sense of security and comfort (Otrębska-Popiołek 1991: 128).

Relationship and support are mutually contingent, which is expressed in terms such as *helping relationship* (Brammer) and *supportive relationship* (Carl Rogers). The helping relationship "is dynamic, meaning that it is constantly changing at verbal and nonverbal levels. The relationship is the principle process which both helper [assessor] and helpee [referee and assistant referees] use to express and fulfil their needs. The relationship is the chief means for meshing and matching helpee problems with helper expertise" (Brammer 1984: 61). A supportive relationship is defined by attitudes and behaviours such as being trustworthy, being unambiguous in communicating who one is, experiencing a positive attitude, accepting every aspect of another person, avoiding judgements, affirming and recognizing the other person's capabilities" (Chrost 2020: 158–159).

In education, the helping relationship is related to the need to implement systemic supportive solutions, but, above all, it stems from the specific features of a teacher's work the subjects of which are the student and the parent.

## Relationships with people as a model of support in education

Topics related to helping occupy an important place in pedagogy and its many subdisciplines (social pedagogy, special pedagogy, preschool and early school pedagogy, and resocialization pedagogy). In educational terms, helping is understood as facilitating development, supporting upbringing and teaching, and assisting in carrying out educational tasks (Skalbania, Babiarez, Bidziński 2020: 17).

The understanding of the term is associated with various supportive actions of the teacher triggered in the situation of a need defined as a lack of something or a failure to meet certain conditions. The helping relationship occurs in the form of intervention, social integration or systematic support. It is possible to view it from different perspectives and highlight both benefits and risks. In this article, the complexity of the issue of helping in the teacher-parent relationship is reduced to the analysis of selected aspects of the model of helping, the teacher's attitude and communication tools.

While describing the models of support, I refer to the models of work of counsellors, which were diagnosed and described by Bożena Wojtasik (1993), with the assumption that the helper takes the role of the counsellor. The author, based on the types of counselling distinguished and described by Alicja Kargulowa (directive, liberal and dialogical), lists five models of counsellors' work: an expert, an informer, a consultant, an acquiescent caregiver, and a *laissez-faire* counsellor (Kargulowa 2006; Wojtasik 1993). Each of these counsellors has a different style of work and uses different techniques of conversation, which results from the psychological concept of man they have adopted (behavioural, psychodynamic, cognitive, or humanistic). The assumptions of a certain concept determine the specific features and course of the relationship with another person. In the model focused on directive helping, there is an expert counsellor and an informer counsellor. Their relationship is based on the clear dominance of the helper, the objective treatment of the one who receives help, and a strong focus on problem solving. In educational practice, an example of such a relationship is the parent's need to acquire specific knowledge or information, and to obtain ready-made instructions and specific guidance related to the child. In this case, the supportive relationship is led by the teacher who asks closed-ended questions, provides a ready-made solution to the problem and bears one-person responsibility. The expert counsellor relies on extensive knowledge and does not take into account the emotional state or the needs of the parent. Such a counsellor encourages and convinces the parent using positive reinforcement or, sometimes, persuasion. The informer counsellor also works in a directive model, but focuses more on the perspective of the parent. He or she provides a lot of information to the parent on developmental and educational issues. This model of

helping does not fit into the humanistic trend because of the instrumental treatment of the person being helped and the excessive focus on the problem, although it is often part of the teacher's supportive activities. The teacher's work with the parent in the liberal model of helping is slightly different. Here the teacher takes the role of a *laissez-faire* counsellor or an acquiescent caregiver who does not give advice or guidance, but focuses on the person and his or her emotions, listens attentively, seeks to inspire hope in the parent, and encourages him or her to act. The aim of the teacher's activities is, above all, understanding and empathy.

In the dialogic model of helping, the teacher-counsellor, who takes the role of a consultant, defines the problem, interprets the statements, and works with the parent to find a solution to the problem. The essence of the consultant-counsellor's work is a constructive dialogue and joint search for information through asking questions (see Oleniacz 2011). In educational practice, such a model of helping embodies humanistic principles where there is room for dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect. The teacher in the role of counsellor-consultant avoids non-inclusive language and gives the parent space for independent action and time for reflection. Educational practice shows the dominance of the directive model in which the teacher becomes an expert or informer on both didactic and supportive issues. However, it is worth considering the introduction of other models by approaching the relationship from the perspective of humanistic-oriented concepts.

The model of support implies the teacher's attitude which influences the relationship and determines the outcomes. Carl Rogers, a representative of humanistic psychology, distinguishes the following attitudes that are important for the helping relationship: empathic understanding, kindness, authenticity, precision, immediacy, and the ability to confront (after: Macario, Rocchi 2011: 17–19). The attitude of empathic understanding allows the teacher to imagine him/herself in the parent's situation in order to learn what the parent feels and what his/her beliefs are, which is related to the level of perception of another person. Kindness means accepting the other person's choices and words which express their current needs. Authenticity means the compliance of one's verbal message with one's own experiences and non-verbal messages. High precision facilitates the communication

of clear and intelligible messages, and limits communication to the most important issues and details. The ability to confront is the ability to notice the differences between the parent's words and feelings (his/her emotional state). The attitude of immediacy helps one to immediately interpret the emotions that arise between the teacher and the parent.

In the development of the support relationship it is important to personalize it, through, e.g. a gradual shift from impersonal messages to "I" messages, e.g. *It is believed that a child with a disability should continue his/her education in a special school*, to: *I think that segregated/ special education is not a good solution*. Another important element that facilitates progress is feedback which improves mutual understanding and more precise communication between the teacher and the parent, e.g. *I understood from your statement that the issue of choosing an educational path is very important and, at the same time, very difficult for you*. Another element, namely co-participation opens up a common space for the interlocutors to share experiences, exchange insights and show their own perspective to the other person. The exchange in communication oscillates between the dynamics of opposition and the dynamics of addition (Macario, Rocchi 2011: 53).

Another focus of the analysis is communication tools related to the helping model and selected contexts of the helping relationship: relationship building, exploring the parents' needs, reflection, and increasing the parents' motivation to act independently (see Nowosielska, Suchowiecka, Wielochowska 2016).

When building a helping relationship, the involvement of both parties, mutual trust and understanding is required, guided by the postulate of dialogicality and a genuine encounter according to the principles of philosophical anthropology and the philosophy of dialogue (Szulakiewicz 2018: 87). An encounter in the spirit of a dialogical relationship is characterised by the "recognition and affirmation of the other, directness and exclusivity, reciprocity and openness" (Bruner 2006: 86). In a supportive relationship, dialogue is more often undertaken by the counsellor-consultant, as I have already mentioned. Another condition is the agreement that the parent, like the teacher, can take both roles, which reinforces the sense of responsibility and the possibility to look at the object of the relationship from different perspectives. Such an approach reduces loneliness which is often



experienced by the person seeking help, who experiences a threefold rift (see Kargulowa 2006: 134–146). It is important to invite the parent to the meeting, rather than force him/her to participate, and to recognise dialogue as the basic form of communication. The skill of attentive listening manifests itself in identifying and naming the supported person's emotions. Listening sometimes means reflecting what is beyond words. The individual contract between the teacher and the parent is a valuable tool in building a helping relationship, which is structured by both parties and imposes certain obligations on them. In other words, it is a formalised and detailed record of commitments that takes into account the needs of both parties. Its purpose is to show the parent how to solve the problem, to strengthen his/her self-confidence and to encourage their own activity.

One of the tools that explore the needs of the parent is free conversation directed at what the parent identifies as a lack, deficit or weakness. It can address several areas: assessment and diagnosis, the child's educational path, the process of supporting development and rehabilitation, the upbringing process, or the process related to the child's further educational and professional career planning. The interview process is very important and can be supported by projection techniques, such as unfinished sentences, which make it possible to identify and prioritize needs, and to identify barriers that hinder their fulfillment.

Reflection in the supportive relationship is teacher-initiated thought, consideration, explanation, translation, anticipation, attentiveness and sensitivity to experiences. It makes it possible to return to meaningful events and to analyse how they unfolded, which, in turn, leads to re-interpretations. As Jerome Bruner notes, reflection is the understanding of meaning; it is entering the "meta" level and cognitive functioning at that level; it is returning to the consequence of trying to explain certain events (situations), and reflecting on one's own way of thinking (Bruner 2006: 128). The tools for reflection are, in the first place, asking questions, as well as observing things carefully to assign meanings to what we hear and see.

A tool that increases the parent's motivation to be active is the language of diagnosis and support which describes reality and suggests what to do next. It is worth using the language of benefits and

acceptance, while abandoning the language of segregation and labeling, e.g. disabled, dyslectic.

When outlining a positive image of a helping relationship, it is important to bear in mind the pitfalls associated with it and mentioned, among others, by Kargul (2004), Wojtasik (2004) and Otrębska-Popiołek (1991). According to Bożena Wojtasik, “the safest way is for the counsellor to use techniques that fall under liberal counselling: listening and understanding, paraphrasing, explaining, asking open-ended questions, reflecting feelings, observing, using “I” statements, supporting and building hope, and stimulating for action” (Wojtasik 2004: 61). The supportive relationship between the teacher and the parent is an important element in the school’s activity, which takes into account the significance of help and support in the broadly defined educational process (see Skalbania 2008; 2015; 2020). It is, by definition, asymmetrical as the positions of the helper and the one who receives help are unequal. When entering into this relationship, the person who is being helped informs the other of his/her weakness, or even helplessness, in the process of threefold rift that Alicja Kargulowa wrote about (2006). It should be remembered that in humanistic terms “each interpersonal relationship is a system of subjects, but not all relationships are consciously built in order to shape subjectivity” (Skalbania 2015: 85). Such understanding of a relationship lends it a dynamic character and important role in the process of creating oneself, understanding others, supporting, and also eliciting reflection and developing the subjective I-You.

### **A supportive relationship: a message to the teachers**

Considering supportive practice in the teacher-parent relationship, the following suggestions should be taken into account:

1. Change the thinking of the helping relationship as a problem-solving activity.
2. Note the value of conversation and language in a supportive relationship.
3. Choose support techniques and tools that are adequate to the changing needs of the person who receives help.
4. Use dialogue as the basic form of contact.

5. Develop the awareness and reflection of the parents as co-responsible for helping.
6. Develop positive thinking and inspire hope.
7. Be aware of the pitfalls and dangers of an improperly handled supportive relationship.

Helping is becoming a necessary element of human life in the rapidly changing world, which indicates the need for thorough reflection on the human being in order to understand that an interpersonal relationship is more important than the solution to the existing problem (see Malinowska [2011: 153]).

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