

## **Teacher as an Authority? Supporting the Student's Sense of Belonging to the School Community as a Condition for Their Development and the Teacher's Success in Educating**

### **Abstract**

The article aims to show the importance of the teacher's authority in the modern school. The authors present a different view from the one well established in the literature looking at the problem of the formation of teachers' authority. In addition to the definitions relating to the professional competence and cognitive abilities, a significant aspect of the analysis was focused on the teacher's ability to form and shape the student's sense of belonging to school. The paper also includes the research findings univocally indicating that the teacher is a highly regarded authority if they can build and maintain positive relationships in the classroom between them and students as well as between the students themselves, especially the ones manifesting difficulties in the current social functioning.

**Keywords:** *authority, teacher, sense of belonging, student*

The contemporary times are marked by uncertainty, ambivalence and axiological relativism and thus they inevitably draw our attention and reflection to those who are socially obliged to provide professional assistance to a human being in search of the answers to important existential questions as well as the ones that arise in daily contact with life, namely to teachers. It is their authority, preparation, professional qualifications and competence which make it possible to implement the sublime pedagogical ideas and concepts of education, and simultaneously they are the guarantee of the highest quality of education under-

stood in terms of both individual and universal good, and also as an economic product.

This article is dedicated to young teachers because the source and nature of the process of shaping the character and strengthening the motivation of a young man for socially engaged development and, in particular, for the stimulation of curiosity and desire to learn begins with a Master who in the contemporary world of education is placed at school. Still, we are committed to strife for making him a wise Guide who does not only show how to seek reliable sources of knowledge, but also promotes the development of socially desirable attitudes which are expressed by the behaviors supporting social capacity, accountability, and at the same time defies negative social phenomena.

One of many disturbing phenomena relating to the period of adolescence is a conviction of being a social misfit, excluded, isolated and lonesome in the world full of potential opportunities, which is exhibited by contemporary young people. Experiencing the phenomenon of being a social misfit as well as lacking the sense of belonging may prove to have dangerous repercussions as it narrows the possibility of full development and might entail serious social functioning disorders - manifesting behavior which is hostile and even dangerous for both themselves and others, such as the increasingly common cases of *school shooting* in the USA and Western Europe (Wilczyńska, A., 2013).

In the pedeutological literature the concept of teacher is inextricably bound to the concept of authority, as the teacher has always performed, especially for children and youth, educational functions the implementation of which assumes the influence of the teacher on the student, and the final result depends largely on whether and to what extent an individual is prone to subject to this influence. Thus, the question of whether the contemporary teacher is an authority and how it can be built is a basic and essential question in the context of pondering over the modern school and education in general (cf. Pitula, B., Sacher, W.A., 2014). More and more pedagogical and psychological debates are being shifted towards the recognition of how the relationship between the teacher and the student may influence students' involvement in school activities and increase their motivation to learn (cf. Pitula, B., Kitlińska-Król, M., 2010).

Through the concept of belonging we mostly understand the student's sense of being appreciated and fitting in some respects into other people important to them, as well as a sense of place and time in the space in which they pursue their goals in life. The need to belong is an important interpersonal theme, heavily regulating the behavior, emotions and thoughts of an individual (Wilczyńska, A., 2013). The sense of belonging has a direct and strong impact on the student's involve-

ment in social activities and school. Satisfying the need to belong is conducive to the development of intrinsic motivation (including the motivation for learning), self-regulation, internalization, autonomy and leads to higher self-esteem and self-efficacy and a better image of oneself (Osterman, K.F., 2000: 323–367).

In the manner of thinking about this issue, two complementary meanings of authority are pointed out: knowledge, experience, competence vs. power and entitlement to control as well as enforce the set rules. Therefore, one can speak about an authority only in the context of the existing relationships between people; the value dependent on the people whose behavior determines whether it is strengthened, weakened or simply disappears. It also results from the socio-cultural changes undertaken within the axiological system of a particular society, and its basis is formed by the desirable values.

### **The problem of the teacher's authority in the authors' own research**

The research findings on the quality of teachers' professional performance based on the assumption that a well-functioning teacher is the one who is an authority for their students were used in an attempt to answer the question whether the contemporary teacher is an authority. As a basis for the methodological research frame the concept of constant individual personality traits was adopted as the one allowing for appearance of changes in students' functioning (Wilsz, J., 2009). Basing on the concept terminology, it can be concluded that effective professional functioning of the teacher is granted by constant personality traits assuming the expected corresponding values.

According to the adopted quantitative paradigm of scientific cognition the research exploration conducted here was designated by the principal aim which was to see the values of constant individual personality traits of the studied teachers and the diagnosis of the quality of their professional functioning and performance.

The main problem of the research took the form of the following questions: Do the values of constant individual personality traits determine the professional functioning of the teacher? And therefore do they determine the fact of being an authority? Consequently, do (and if so, how) the formation and/or support of the student's sense of belonging to the class, school, and community enhance their motivation to learn and the level of their self-esteem? (Hagerty, B.M.K., Patusky, K.L., 1995:9–13)

Solving the research problem required the use of several methods: testing, diagnostic survey and statistical methods. The study was carried out at four stages by means of properly selected tools. The first of them served for the diagnosis of constant individual personality traits of the teachers; for this purpose the standardized scales developed by Jolanta Wilsz was applied. The second stage included the diagnosis of the teachers' competencies/skills necessary for the implementation of professional tasks. In this case the questionnaire on the implementation of professional tasks and the questionnaire which addressed the teachers' directors were used to verify the teachers' declarations. On the basis of the collected results the quality of the teachers' professional tasks performance was concluded. The third stage of the study procedure was the verification of the thesis on the existence of a relationship between the values of constant individual personality traits and the quality of the teacher's professional functioning, functioning as an authority. The final stage of the study included a longitudinal study conducted among junior secondary school students and secondary school students, who were evaluated in terms of social functioning and particularly in terms of their involvement in school activities, depending on their sense of belonging to their environment (Baumeister, R.F., Leary M.R., 1995:497–529). Here the study of various psychological variables was applied based on the standardized psychological tools.

The research was conducted in 2009 among 85 teachers employed in different types of schools in the province of Silesia, then in order to verify it the study was repeated in 2013. The sample was randomly selected, the only criterion was willingness to participate in the research. All the respondents completed university education specializing in a given subject and accomplished full professional training.

The study involving students was conducted in 2012 and 2013 on a group of 60 students aged 14–16 years. The study included students with the diagnosed problems in social functioning, i.e. frequent outbursts of anger, malice or vindictiveness, initiation of physical fights and other behavior involving serious violation of norms and social rules. The study also included students manifesting school problems which could be solved or reduced only through cooperation with the teacher enjoying the appreciation of their high authority on the part of the students.

The research study was designed to examine how and in what way the functioning as well as the resources of young people potentially at risk of social exclusion resulting from their involvement in various group activities of limited duration undergo change. The conducted classes were accompanied by monitoring changes

in the selected psychological variables (need for belonging, sense of belonging, mood (hedonistic tone, energetic stimulation, time perception), emotional intelligence, self-esteem, anger expression), changes in the cardiovascular parameters were also examined, the analyses of which were also included in the set of tests (systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, pulse). The study of cardiovascular variability is now recognized as one of the most promising directions of research allowing for an insight into almost all human emotional, cognitive and motivational processes (Sosnowski, T., 2008), and an increase in the systolic blood pressure is indicated as a manifestation of a sense of “being included” (involved) (Schwerdtfeger, A., Friedrich-Mai, P., 2009:501–509).

In the conducted study the psychological variables and psychophysiological parameters were evaluated several times: before the launch of the classes they were aimed at “social inclusion”, during the course and after its completion. The aim of the study was to determine how the sense of belonging changes and in what way it is related to the change of other psychological parameters of the students and their functioning (Kaczmarek, Ł.D., Drązkowski, D., 2013). This was an experimental study in which the study group participated in two types of activities involving them in intense positive relationships with others – these were Eudaimonia classes (the so-called group “E”) and hedonistic classes (the so-called group “H”) based on the scenarios of positive psychology. The control group (group “C”) participated passively in a lecture and was not engaged in establishing and maintaining relationships. Meetings in all the groups lasted for six weeks, two hours per week, involving two tutors (Wilczyńska, A., 2014).

## **Research findings**

The results indicate that 30.6% of the teachers obtained the so-called zero emission, the most desirable one from the perspective of the performed professional activities, being as if a guarantee of stability, objectivity, openness and accountability, which condition the process of effective communication with the student, accurate reading of their needs and intentions, and making optimum decisions. Within the range of average positive emission there were 21.2% of the respondents. This level is referred to as the so-called average, sufficient for the correct execution of professional activities marked by the rule of the professional role. Average negative emission was found in 28.2% of the teachers. This value was determined as the necessary minimum, guaranteeing a mostly correct but schematic course of the implementation of professional activities. None of the

surveyed teachers presents an extensive positive value of emission, which is characterized by significant “external expansiveness” of an individual, emotional instability, uncertainty in decision making. Extensive negative emission is manifested by 20% of the respondents. They are teachers distancing themselves from interpersonal relations, with an attitude directed “towards themselves”, focused on achieving their own goals and aspirations. None of the teachers interviewed obtained the optimum (i.e. very high) value of tolerance. This value is conducive to the complete acceptance of the student, understanding their desires and aspirations, and it protects against the hastiness of the decisions and superficial assessment and helps to support the student’s development. A high level of tolerance (i.e. sufficient) was found in 28.3% of the respondents. The values obtained predispose the teachers to respect the principles of empowerment and partnership in the pedagogical actions.

A low value of tolerance was found in 18.8% of the respondents, a very low one was not manifested. Hence, it can be assumed that the professional functioning of this group of teachers will be at high risk of errors (both didactic and educational ones) resulting from the “only legitimate standard action pattern”.

The teaching profession is inextricably associated with directing, being a leader, the necessity to defend one’s position, the independence of judgment and assessment. Thus, it requires the ability not to submit to the pressure and influences of the environment. In this context, the optimum value of vulnerability for the teacher should be very low (48.2% of the teachers obtained such a result); low (29.4% of the respondents); or average (i.e., the minimum value for the teaching profession) - this value of the trait was observed in 15.3% of the respondents. The remaining teachers (7.1%) achieved a high value of the feature. Therefore, it may be expected that they will have problems to maintain order and discipline in the classroom, implement the decisions and tasks which have been undertaken, and they will have to deal with the resistance and manipulation of the students.

Mental capacity, the ability to associate things rapidly, creative thinking, and excellent memory are qualities highly desirable in the teaching profession. In this model they were defined as processability and reproducibility.

The highest value of the feature was demonstrated by 10.6% of the respondents. A slightly lower, i.e. high value was diagnosed in 22.4% of the respondents, an average level was found in 34.1% of the teachers. It can therefore be assumed that the action of these three groups of teachers will be adequate for the needs and tasks: unusual, unconventional, efficient. Too low values of processability were obtained by the total of 32.9% of the respondents. Thus, problems may be

predicted in coping with the complexity and uncertainty of didactic and educational situations.

Beyond any doubt, a long-term and large-capacity memory is highly desirable in the teaching profession. The optimum value of the property is within the range (50–43 very high), and this was manifested by 43.6% of the teachers. A low value of the feature is estimated among 22.3% of the study participants (the very low one was not found). Those teachers can come across some difficulties in their work arising from confusing facts and events, and forgetting important information, which can lead to a negative assessment of the measures taken by them on the part of the students, their passive resistance, or resignation from maintaining interpersonal relations.

Juxtaposing the features marked in the study with the values described in the model of a perfect teacher it can be assumed that the majority, i.e. two thirds of the teachers, exhibit the values of the qualities compatible with this model. Thus, the answer to the question posed in the title could be in the affirmative if the teacher manifests the appropriate personality traits, is well educated, and constantly improves their skills. The teachers meeting these conditions were included to conduct classes at the next stage.

The results of the study conducted among the adolescents before the launch of the classes, during the classes and after their completion (the measurements were taken just after the completion of the classes, then three months later, and finally six months after their cessation) showed significant changes in the resources and functioning of the youth. Still, all the results univocally confirmed that only active participation of groups “E” and “H” reinforced the students’ resources (in the control group no changes were registered). The research findings also showed explicitly that the cessation of the classes in groups “E” and “H”, despite the fact that it had been planned and settled with the youth, evoked as a consequence the sense of “exclusion” of the young people from positive relationships, which resulted in a cascade of non-adaptive behavior along with the deterioration of the results within almost every psychological variable tested (cf. Leary, M.R., Twenge, J.M., Quinlivan, E., 2006:11 – 132).

The study was aimed at a previously not carried out on such a scale long-term evaluation of the functioning of young people with disturbed behavior after the completion of a positive relationship for them. The detailed research findings showed a large number of significant results merely three months after the cessation of the classes. In group “E” the students exhibited significantly lower results compared to group “C” for the following variables: “Energetic Stimulation”, “Hedonistic Tone”, “Emotional Intelligence”, “Self-Esteem”, “Need for Sense of Belonging”,

“Sense of Belonging” ( $r \in <0.29; 0.45>$ ). Group “H”, similarly to group “E”, obtained significantly lower scores in “Energetic Stimulation” and “Hedonistic Tone”. At the same time, the former group showed higher scores compared to the control group in two variables: “External Anger” and the systolic blood pressure. The size of the effect was slightly lower when compared to group “E” (0.28 to 0.34).

When comparing the long-term results with the initial ones, significant differences were obtained in the following variables (the group and direction of the change given in brackets): “Time Perception - Future” (E-), “Need for Sense of Belonging” (E-), the systolic blood pressure (E+), “Time Perception - Hedonistic Presence” (H+), “External Anger” (H+), the diastolic blood pressure (H+), the systolic blood pressure (H+).

The size of the effect in the case of intra-group comparisons ranged from 0.41 to 0.88. The highest values of Cohen’s coefficient  $r$  (above 0.7) were obtained for the systolic and diastolic blood pressure (group “H” after 6 months) and “Time Perceptions – Fatalistic Presence” (group “E” after 3 months).

The obtained results confirmed our predictions: participation in social group activities reinforced the potential of the people while participating in the classes - but after their completion, the participants apparently experienced the phenomenon of their disconnection from important relationships - and therefore experienced a sense of “exclusion” in both experimental groups, regardless of the class specialization. One would think that the relationship that was developed between the participants in the group and the tutors was the only one experienced by the young people in their environment. A considerable part of them grew up in care centers or in families with problems (single parent families, unemployment, alcohol abuse by family members, violence, etc.).

The presented research material evidence confirms that young people at risk of social exclusion present no effective ways to cope with their environment - they do not know how to resolve difficult situations and how to deal with them, on their own they are not able to make interactions serving the development of their sense of belonging in their environment. Young people do not know how to form and maintain non-conflicting and friendly relations. These problems relate to children and young people who did not inherit from their environment effective patterns of coping in difficult situations, have problems in the family or at school and/or suffer from their disturbed behavior (cf. Garbarino, J., 1999).

The obtained results allow for the following conclusions:

1. For their full development young people need to participate in several direct relationships with other people in which they feel appreciated, respected and important.



2. The loss of important relationships and not replacing them with other ones results in numerous non-adaptive social behavior patterns, such as reduction of the sense of belonging, a decrease in their self-esteem and positive mood, and an increase in the level of anger.
3. Students at risk of social exclusion need long-term psychological or pedagogical support (interventions) through which valuable relationships for a young man are formed (possible to continue for at least one school cycle).

The teacher's authority can therefore be measured not only by their expertise as a specialist who is in the possession of knowledge and points to students the way to explore it, but it is mainly reflected by forming valuable relationships with their students, in which the teacher makes each student feel important and appreciated.

## **Conclusions**

The paper presented original and innovative research in which for the first time, *inter alia*, psychophysiological measurements were used to determine the way of the students' functioning. To measure the sense of belonging a new tool, adapted for the purpose of this research, was applied to investigate the need and the sense of belonging of the students. To implement the experimental classes, the teachers used original scenarios based on the latest findings of positive psychology (the Eudaimonia concepts and the hedonistic ones). The research plan included analysis of the long-term effects of the student diagnosed with behavioral disorders.

The study also had its limitations: the functioning of the students in the long-term aspect had not been investigated before the launch of the study, which has an influence on certain interpretation limitations of the obtained data.

The research findings showed the importance of long-term psychological/pedagogical interventions for young people, especially the fact of the teacher's undertaking activities reinforcing the sense of belonging of the individual and continuing these activities together with the student. What is important here is the unconditional acceptance of the student, which means respecting their otherness, appreciating their individual efforts and highlighting the fact of fitting in with others as well as being important for other members of the group and the school, which is strengthening the sense of belonging.

The conclusion drawn from the study entails a postulate to combine pedagogical concepts and principles of positive psychological interventions for developing and supporting the resources and welfare of young people, in particular to develop and support the sense of autonomy and competence of the student and emphasize

the essence of meeting their need for relationships with others, which is necessary for full human development, especially at the stage of adolescence.

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