

Empathic Sensitivity of Children with Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Learning Environment in Poland

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Abstract

Empathic sensitivity or empathy is the basis for human interactions and communication, proper interpersonal relationships. As a process and phenomenon, it is particularly important in education and social and emotional functioning. The research, which has already been conducted, was focused on the development of empathic sensitivity of children and young, able-bodied people. The reform of education in Poland implemented in 1989 enabled students with special educational needs to access education in mainstream schools. Preliminary studies in this field are an attempt to show the empathic sensitivity of children with special educational needs who are learning together with healthy, non-disabled friends – their peers in mass education, which is inclusive. The aim of this paper is to present the research outcomes concerning inclusive education in the Podkarpackie Province, Poland.

Keywords: *empathic sensitivity, special educational needs, inclusive education.*

Introduction

More and more children with special educational needs learn in Polish schools. At the same time, these students receive individual assistance and support in education and development. Assuming that empathy is a measure of socialization of the child, especially in the early stages of their development, the education of

parents, teachers, educators, therapists, and other specialists, i.e. all those who are responsible for stimulating the child's development, should be of particular concern to take care of the child's whole development properly, and especially their sphere of emotional and social functioning and develop their empathic sensitivity.

Empathic sensitivity and its importance for the functioning of the child at school

Empathy as a phenomenon existed as early as in ancient times, but its form was rather a kind of sympathy and compassion (cf., Smith A., 1976). In psychological processes, a very important role is assigned to this term, which is getting to know other people by getting to know and understanding each other better (cf., Morgan S., 1984).

R. Hogan presents empathy as an intellectual or conceptual understanding of the other person's condition (cf., Hogan R., 1969). According to C. Rogers, empathy is a process associated with identification or taking on the role of the other person (cf., Rogers C., 1975).

American experts from The Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities claim that social competences are one of the key aspects of empathy and occur alongside reading, writing, reasoning, counting and others as the basis for a proper learning process (cf., Forness S.R., in DSM-IV Sourcebook, 1997, pp. 67–74).

Inclusive education of children with special needs

Inclusion in education is aimed at improving the conditions of school work organization and eliminating barriers in the education process for all students (cf., Booth T., Ainscow M., 2002, pp. 3–4). In the *Guide to inclusive education*, Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow (2002, p. 3) confirm that “strengthening the inclusion means limiting the activities leading to exclusion”. In Poland, as early as in the 70s of the 20th century, Aleksander Hulek suggested the idea of integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools. He wrote, among other things, “both in the distant and closer future, disabled children learned, learn and will continue to learn in regular schools” (Hulek A., 1992, p. 17). As stated in the 1960s and 70s by Aleksander Hulek (1992, p. 8), who is today considered as the father of integration, “Integration is the essence of the content of mutual relations between the disabled

student and other students, the disabled student and the teacher, other staff and administration. It is about the quality of attitudes, shared experiences, etc.”

Empathic sensitivity of children with special needs. Assumptions in the author’s own study

For the purpose of the research, the author adopted the problem whose main content is the level of empathic sensitivity of children with special educational needs in inclusive education, and how it affects their functioning at school. Another question is how it develops depending on the respondents’ gender or whether these children exhibit a higher ability of empathizing compared with non-disabled friends – peers. Other questions include the level of empathic sensitivity of boys with special needs compared to boys, the level of empathic sensitivity of girls with special educational needs compared to girls. At the same time, a working hypothesis was adopted, assuming that the level of empathy in children with special educational needs is diverse, and it has a significant impact on their school performance. The examined children were both from rural and urban backgrounds, diagnosed by teachers due to learning disabilities and accompanying disorders such as attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and behavioral disorders (CD).

Research methodology, organization and tools

Empathy has been dealt with many times in other studies, but there are no studies on the empathy of children with special educational needs in the conditions of mass education. For example, Chrisholm K. (1995) found that the level of empathy was lower in adolescents with behavioral disorders, and girls achieved higher scores in identifying the emotions of others. Zahn-Waxler C., Cole P.M., Welsh J.D., and Fox N.A., (1995), researching children with low, moderate and high risk of developing behavioral disorders, found out that girls showed more pro-social behaviors than boys. Children with a low risk of developing behavioral disorders positively empathized with others, as opposed to children with moderate and high risk of behavioral disorders. A study by Ricard M., Kamberk-Kilicci M. (1995) on a group of 90 girls in the age groups of 4, 6 and 8 showed that empathy was assessed according to the correspondence between the emotion identified in a character and the emotion reported by the subject with the interpretation

given for the subject's reaction. The quality of interpretation was found to increase with the age of the examined girls. The study of Cummins A., Piek J.P., and Dyck M.J., conducted in 2005 on a sample of 234 children, examined the relationship between motor coordination problems, emotion recognition and social behavior. The study revealed that children with motor difficulties performed more poorly on scales measuring the ability to recognize static and changing facial expressions of emotion, even when visuospatial processing was controlled.

Studies have been carried out which show that students with learning difficulties and ADHD have low social competences (cf., Gresham F.M., Mac Millan D.L., 1997, pp. 381–382). Other studies confirm that children with less severe disabilities such as learning disabilities also have difficulties in terms of the structure of social network connections in the small number of people they identify as important to them (Wenz-Gross M., Siperstein G.N., 1997, p.184). Further research confirms that the majority of such students exhibit social competence disorders that co-exist with their school failures (cf., Kavale K.A., Forness S.R., 1996, pp. 233–234). In addition, these children may also experience further learning-inhibiting factors such as learned helplessness, low self-esteem, inactivity or a weaker sense of internal control (cf., Mamlin N., Harris K.R., Case L.P., 2001, pp. 214–220).

For the implementation of research procedure, the author used a survey method, a diagnostic tool called the Test of Interpersonal Awareness, developed by H. Borke according to J. Rembowski (1989), and questionnaire interviews with teachers. The study group consisted of children with special educational needs attending mainstream schools. For the purposes of this study, a group of children with mild intellectual disabilities was identified. The children attended mass schools implementing the concept of inclusion, which secures support for students with special educational needs. The selection criterion for the study was a diagnosis in the form of a judgment on the need to support the student in education and development prepared by specialists from psychological and educational clinics. In total, the study involved 166 children from primary schools in the Podkarpackie Province, including 60 children with special educational needs, including 30 girls and 30 boys. The concept of children of special educational needs is used for the purposes of this publication interchangeably with children with special educational needs, with respect for their special educational needs and development. For comparison, the research also included 40 boys, friends – peers, and 66 girls. The study was conducted at the turn of October and November 2016 among second grade students of in selected inclusive schools of the Podkarpackie Province. Using interviews with the teachers, students were qualified to a group of children with special educational needs, and the level of their empathic sensitivity

was tested by means of the Test of Interpersonal Awareness by H. Borke. The Test of Interpersonal Awareness used for the purpose of the study is in the form of a pictorial test and contains 11 stories that can make someone amused, upset, scared and angry. Two stories were used for the adopted emotional reaction. If the child assigned appropriate facial expression to two stories, he/she was awarded 1 point. The test for the child's empathic sensitivity began with identification of emotions shown on the faces, and then the child was told a story while being presented an illustration showing this situation. The child filled in the blank space in the drawing with the illustration of the face reflecting the emotional states of the person in the presented story. For every correct answer – reading the emotional state of the character in the story, the child received 1 point. In the case of giving incorrect answer, the child received 0 points. Boundary values were calculated by adding up points in the horizontal columns for each child in the group. To determine the levels of empathy, data from the table was used, taking into account the number of correct answers. A three-stage scale was adopted depending on the number of points awarded to the tested children, ranging from 0 to 8. Thus, three levels of empathy were distinguished.

Three levels of empathy adopted for the purpose of the study:

- 8–7 high level of empathic sensitivity
- 6–5 average level of empathic sensitivity,
- 4–0 low level of empathic sensitivity.

Results of the author's own study on the empathic sensitivity of children with special educational needs

The study revealed that most children with special needs present an *average level of sensitivity*, i.e., 50.0% of the children, and a *high level*, i.e., 35.0%, whereas only 15.0% of the children with special educational needs from this group are those show a *low level* of empathic sensitivity, i.e., 9 children from this group. For comparison, in the group of children without disabilities, more than half of the children in the study present an *average level of* empathic sensitivity, i.e., 55.0%, which is slightly more, but at the same time only 23.3% show a *high level*, and as many as 21.7% of this group are children with low empathic sensitivity. In the analysis of the emotional reactions of children with special educational needs, depending on the respondents' gender, using H. Borke test, the studies have confirmed that the girls can identify emotional reactions of other people in different situations more accurately than the boys. The girls with special educational needs

did not find any difficulty in empathic response to situations of satisfaction, like joy, cheerfulness, happiness. In the group of girls, all the answers were correct (100.0%). But in the group of boys with special educational needs, correct answers were given in the vast majority of cases, i.e., 93.3%. For other emotional reactions, however, there were significant difficulties. The ability to recognize feelings of sadness is much smaller, and in the girls it occurred at 67.0% and in the group of boys with special educational needs there was even a smaller percentage, i.e., half of the respondents (50.0%). Similar results were obtained in the analysis of stories presenting the experience of fear, which is a problem for some children who are unable to recognize the feeling. The girls with special educational needs indicated correct answers at 89.0%, and the correct answers with respect to the feelings of fear amount to 60.0%. The greatest difficulty for the children with special educational needs was the feeling of anger and because of that the girls gave 86.7% of correct answers, while the boys were even further behind, with correct answers to 51.7% of the questions. In the analysis of empathy of children with special educational needs compared with children without disabilities using H. Borke's Interpersonal Awareness Test, the studies have confirmed that the children with special educational needs present a higher level of empathic sensitivity than other children. Similar studies conducted by A. Gasiulowa (1993) showed that empathic sensitivity of children with reduced mobility is definitely at a higher level than in children without disabilities. The research confirms that children with special educational needs and children without such difficulties present different levels of ability to empathize, depending on the type of emotion. The children with special educational needs can probably empathize with the situation of others more easily, and therefore they can more easily identify the feelings of sadness and anger. They can identify sadness at 67.0%, while the other children identified correctly only 50.0% of the cases. Anger was identified by 73.3% of them and by 55.0% of other children. In contrast, the children in the latter group could more accurately recognize the feelings of joy (98.3%) and fear (80.0%), while 90.0% of the children with special educational needs accurately identified the feeling of joy and 76.7% of them the feeling of fear.

The analysis of the level of empathic sensitivity among the boys with special educational needs in relation to boys and the girls with special educational needs in relation to girls also confirmed that the boys identified emotional states of boys more accurately than girls' emotional states. The degree of the ability to recognize feelings of joy of boys with deviations from the norm in relation to other boys is 96.7%, which means that these boys refer to their own experience connected with the gender of the respondents. With regard to the girls, the degree of relevancy

of this feeling was much lower and amounted to 86.7%. The boys with deviations from the norm, compared to other surveyed boys, also accurately identified the feeling of sadness (60.0%), while the girls identified this feeling at 45.0%. Similarly, the studies have confirmed the accuracy of recognition of fear. The boys with special educational needs identified this feeling more accurately in relation to other boys, i.e. at the level of 80.0%, which means that they gave 24 correct answers out of 30 possible, while among the girls the relevance was at 50.0%, which means half of the respondents gave correct answers and there were 15 of them. The vast majority of the surveyed boys with special educational needs accurately recognized the feeling of anger in boys, i.e. at 70.0%, while among the girls, this feeling was correctly recognized in only half of the surveyed girls, i.e. 50.0%. The biggest statistical differences within the gender, with which the surveyed boys with special educational needs accurately identify emotional reactions, took place in recognizing emotions of fear, next anger, sadness, and the smallest statistical differences were found in the perception of joy. The boys had the most difficulty in recognizing the feeling of sadness, which happened to be confused by them with the feeling of fear or anger. The recognition of joy posed the least difficulty to the boys with special educational needs. To generalize, the boys with special needs more accurately identify emotional states of boys, presenting a higher level of empathic sensitivity, depending on their own gender, i.e., boys. Emotional reactions of the girls with special needs, depending on the respondents' gender are as follows: all the girls with special needs accurately identified the feelings of joy in girls (100.0%), while the emotions of boys were identified at 97.0%, which means that the difference in the recognition of this emotion is small. A significant difficulty occurred while recognizing sadness in girls, i.e. 80.0%, and among the boys this feeling was recognized only by half or 50.0% of the girls. The degree of accuracy to recognize the feeling of fear of the girls with special educational needs in relation to girls is 97.0%, almost all of the girls surveyed gave the correct answer, and in relation to boys, fear was recognized by 81.0% of the girls. Similarly, anger in girls was identified by the girls correctly at 93.3% and the same feeling in boys was identified by the girls at 80.0%. Generalizing, the biggest differences within the gender with which the girls identify lies in identifying the emotions of sadness and fear, and the statistically smallest difference occurs in identification of joy and anger. Thus, the girls with special educational needs more accurately identified the feelings of girls than boys in an unambiguous way. The difficulties encountered in some of the surveyed girls in relation to boys concerned the identification of sadness as anger or fear by a few of them.

Conclusions

Bearing in mind the particular educational and social situation of children with special educational needs in the conditions of mass education you can risk saying that their functioning in school largely depends on the level of empathic sensitivity.

An important moment in the process of empathizing is to stimulate emotional empathy as a result of understanding the difficulties, experiences or needs of other person, as well as identifying with these difficulties. It motivates the person providing assistance to learn about others and develop empathic behavior in the face of difficulties and other people's experiences. The ability to be empathic is a natural innate potential that develops with the maturity of a human being (cf., J.M. Morse et al., 1992, p. 273). Empathy is not only the ability to feel the individual emotions of another person, but to accept them as if they were one's own world of feelings. This puts high demands on the person who helps: not only empathic sensitivity, but also communication in a language adapted to the level and content of the beneficiary's feelings. The caregiver must present a deep knowledge about the development of human feelings and rich personal experience. All these conditions will allow the person helping to properly interpret the circumstances of understanding needs and emotions, the problems of others who are waiting for help and support (cf., Sapir D., 1969, p. 350).

The research confirms that children with special educational needs present a medium, but also high, level of empathic sensitivity, and only 15.0% of them present a low level of empathic sensitivity. This level is significantly higher compared to the children from the second group – without such problems. Children with special educational needs, who experience many difficulties and problems themselves, can accurately read negative emotions in particular, and empathize more easily with the difficult situation of another person. Especially the feelings of sadness and anger are better recognized in the group of children with special educational needs, which confirms that such feelings are familiar to them. However, not all kinds of emotional responses are recognized better by children with special needs. Feelings of joy and fear were correctly identified by them, but the children without such difficulties identified these feelings more accurately. It can be also said that the accuracy of identifying feelings of joy is significantly large, however, the children manifested difficulties with the indication of differentiation of emotional reactions such as sadness, anger and fear. At the same time, for each of them it is easier to empathize with the situation of a child of the same sex, i.e., the boys with deviations from the norm represent a higher level of empathic

sensitivity with regard to boys than to girls, the girls do likewise. It is obvious that it is easier to empathize with the situation of a child of the same sex. The study also confirmed that children with special educational needs have a higher ability of empathizing than children without such problems. These children are characterized by higher empathic sensitivity. The children with special educational needs could identify the feelings of sadness and anger more accurately, while the children from the second group could better recognize the feelings of joy and fear. When we add up all the correct answers of the children with special educational needs, it turns out that there are definitely more of them comparing with the number of correct answers given by the children without such problems, which confirms that the children with special educational needs show a higher ability to empathize than the children from the group without such difficulties. The research has also confirmed that the level of empathic sensitivity is higher in girls than in boys. The girls with special educational needs can identify emotions such as joy, sadness, fear, or anger more accurately than the boys. Both in the group of children with special educational needs and in the other group, the girls gave more correct answers. This confirms that the level of empathic sensitivity is much higher in girls than in boys. It can be assumed that girls have a natural flair for the manifestation of empathic sensitivity, which in future will be connected with the performance of the role of a mother.

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