Olga Wyżga

School relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic – easy or difficult?

Introduction

The situation of the school in the era of the COVID 19 pandemic requires a holistic view of education. These analyses cannot be limited only to teaching issues. The success of the teaching process in the conditions of the coronavirus epidemic is determined both by the ability to transfer knowledge "at a distance" in a way adapted to the student's abilities, as well as the quality of the mutual relationship.

According to Professor John Hattie from the University of Melbourne, one of the most important factors in improving student performance is the relation between student-and teacher. Students who like their teacher and feel his/her kind attitude to them - learn faster and more effectively (Hattie:2015).

Professor Joachim Bauer – German psychiatrist, professor of medical sciences - emphasizes in his book *What about this school. Seven perspectives for students, teachers and parents*, that in development and learning a key factor is a good pedagogical relationship between student and teacher, which is based on recognition and acceptance (Bauer: 2015).

This is a consequence of the fact that the human brain is oriented to social relationships (*social brain*) – thanks to good bonds it emits dopamine, oxytocin and endogenous opioids which are necessary to make an effort and engage in the learning process.

Therefore, all teaching and educational activities in school should be considered in two dimensions:
- in terms of efficiency, expressed in the degree of the established objectives;
- in terms of ethics, expressed in the degree of consideration of people's subjectivity and individuality involved in the educational relationship.

The educational relationship in the abovementioned dimensions should be subjective, and the partners of the interaction should have the opportunity to act in accordance with the values they respect, while respecting the values of the partners and accepting their autonomy. Both of the indicated dimensions are equally important for the quality of educational interaction.

For more than a year, all the partners of school interactions: students, principals and teachers, non-educators, parents are present, but what is the quality of their being together? They are... but they do not pass each other in the hallway, do not talk during lessons, do not discuss certain issues with each other. They are, but how?

As who? Who are they for themselves? What is the relationship between them?

Background

The term "teacher-student relationships" includes in its range teachers' influence on students' current behavior, on their social and intellectual development, their contribution to maintaining their mental health and in their adaptation to society, as well as the characteristics of the teacher and his/her daily contacts with students (Cohen, Manion, Morrison:1999: 400). The entirety of the aforementioned relations takes place in a learning process consisting of individual teaching situations defined as "the interaction of the teacher, pupils, teaching content, teaching equipment and the organization of education perceived from the position of an external observer, and therefore objectively possible" (Niemierko:1999: 14).

The foreign word dictionary defines a relation as "the relationship between two (or more) objects" (Sobol: 2000: 954).

A school relationship is most often understood as an event occurring in a particular place and time, between specific individuals, according to a certain strategy of action. There are two aspects to defining a relationship like this:

- a static aspect that takes into account the structure of the relationship: student – teacher – teaching, educational, life situation,
- a dynamic aspect that analyzes the conditions, place, form and time of the relationship.

In order to recognize the quality of school relations in times of the pandemic, it is necessary to look at the key conditions for building school relationships, namely cognition, perception and communication.

Getting to know the student is the basis for effective educational work. It provides a lot of information that the teacher can use on a daily basis, by interacting, such as interests, strengths and weaknesses, ways about functioning in the peer group and in the class team. Observation and closer recognition of students with unwanted behavior is not enough. Every student is equally important, because everyone is a part of the community on a daily basis whether they like it or not, they enter into different relationships, constantly resonating with others. That is why it is so important that teachers consciously manage the group process, that they are careful observers of school situations, and that with their behavior, while entering into relations with students as well with other school employees and parents, model the behavior of students (Paszkiewicz: 2014: 26–27).

According to A. Janowski, there are several factors that are crucial in the process of getting to know a student:

- honesty – it is important that students perceive their teacher as sincere, otherwise they will not want to open themselves up to him/her;
- enabling the flow of information – the teacher cannot be the only person speaking in the classroom, but must give students space to speak up, to have discussions, to share their views;
- understanding what one sees – it is crucial to understand that every person interprets different situations based on his or her own beliefs and experiences, so our interpretation is not the only right one, although we often think so, and it is worth looking at the situation from other perspective - from the

point of view of another person or even trying to understand the differences of interpretation;

- understanding of non-verbal messages – a significant part of the information we receive is communicated in a non-verbal way, so mindfulness and the ability to read these messages are extremely important when building relationships;
- trust from students' side – trust, as Lencioni (2016) and Brown (2019) claim, is the foundation for building all relationships, that is why it is so important that students put trust in a teacher, and bearing in mind that trust is not gained just by the mere fact of being an adult, it is necessary to show discretion, loyalty and tact;
- empathy - an attempt to enter into another person's situation, which makes it easier for the teacher to understand the situation of the student and to be a support for him/her. (Janowski: 2007: 1-3).

Building relations in school is linked to the level of socializing and that is related to the skills that form part of an individual's social competence, which includes the ability to communicate effectively.

Positive relations in the contact of the teacher and students require not only getting to know them, but also professional knowledge of the principles and rules of interpersonal communication, but also the ability to use them in didactic practice, which means to be a communication competency teacher and therefore one characterized by, among others:

- "ability to receive communication, especially this non-verbal;
- awareness of existence of disruptions to the communication process in the remote education;
- ability to communicate in a dialogical way which is combined with the ability to adopt a non-directive (cooperating communication pattern);
- resignation from the authoritarian communication pattern;
- ability to include empathic behavior in the communication process" (Kwaśnica: 2004: 300, for: Borawska-Kalbarczyk: 2009: 118–130).

It can be concluded that the relationship in school conditions between the teacher and the student comes down to a mutual interaction carried out in the process of interpersonal communication, aimed at achieving specific didactic and educational results through communication, transferring thoughts, giving messages (Sobol: 2000: 578). The specificity of the relationship between both the teacher and the student, and between the students determines the quality of these relationships as subjects of interpersonal relations.

Research

In order to identify the school's reality regarding relationships, pilot surveys were conducted using the survey technique and questionnaire from Google's tools in a period between 15 September and 15 November 2020.

The use of the diagnostic survey method for research purposes allowed to learn about the phenomenon of school relations in the pandemic time, to determine its scope, and then to evaluate and, as a result, design activities to improve the educational reality in the studied schools.

The recipients of the survey were teachers from the Lesser Poland (Małopolska) voivodeship. The selection of the sample was random. A total of 118 teachers participated in the survey, including 116 women, 2 men, with work experience from 5 to 23 years.

In total a relatively small research group took part in the study to draw far-reaching conclusions from the conducted research. Hence this text should be treated rather as a communication - a report on the situation in the Lesser Poland (Małopolska) voivodeship.

The aim of this research was to identify the school situation in terms of school relations prevailing during the pandemic and remote education. The research problems were the following questions: *How are school relationships formed during the pandemic? How are the relationships between teachers and students built? What is the relationship between teachers as employees of the same school?*

Therefore, in the research tool, teachers were asked among others about: the definition of correct relationships, about the determinants of good teacher/student's and teacher/teacher's relationships in the conditions of the pandemic and remote learning, what methods and forms of remote learning, knowing students, they use to meet their needs? how do they talk to them? how do they design/organize the educational space so that both students and colleagues from work feel good with them and also respondents with them?

A school relationship is a complex construct that can be viewed from different perspectives, i.e.: teacher-student; teacher-teacher; student- student; teacher-principal; teacher-parent.

In this research intentionally only the two most common aspects of school relationships have been considered: teacher-student and teacher-teacher.

The first part of the study focused on teachers' relationships with students, and the second part focused on the relationship between teachers as employees of one school.

Results and discussion

After conducting the survey research, it should be noted that questions about teachers' relationships with students were unlikely to go unanswered, while those about work colleagues relationships in the teaching room often remained unanswered or contained very laconic, perfunctory answers as if the subject raised some concerns among the respondents.

At first, respondents were asked to define the very concept of school relationships. The most common answers were "*these are correct relations, the ability to talk and accept differences of opinion and behavior, the acceptance of people (students, teachers, parents, head teachers) as they are, a healthy atmosphere in school, no conflicts and correct communication*".

In fact, each of these definitions in some respect referred to the importance of communication as a basic determinant of school relationships, all the more in the era of the pandemic, when social isolation is recommended.

The key competence of teachers in building school relationships is the ability to connect/interact with children and young people based on understanding, to give

them a credit of trust, to accept them as they are, and to respect the dignity of each of them. (Paszkiewicz: 2014: 54).

This was also recognised by the survey participants:

"*During remote learning, it was difficult or even impossible to look at the interlocutor – often the cameras were turned off. What was the result of this? I spoke to black squares on the screen and at that time the students were doing different things, not necessarily related to the lesson. So, where is the place for relationships here?*

No one and nothing replaces a direct look at the student's face. How often can you see understanding, boredom, curiosity or helplessness in their faces. And then you already know which way to point your actions."

"*Students have a lot of ideas. And at school, they are more likely to share them. And most importantly, they can quickly achieve them with the help of peers and teachers. By sharing ideas, children learn to formulate their thoughts, become bolder in speaking their minds, practice group collaboration, and shape the proper relationships.*"

Communication is the process by which we create, receive and interpret messages from other people and respond to them in a specific peculiar way. The teacher's mutual interaction with students is made possible because of social skills based on positive communication activities. All these activities make that the communication is an ongoing circular and transactional process, oriented towards the sender and receiver, for which each participant of the communication is responsible (Adams, Galanes: 2008:80).

Similarly, teachers participating in the survey defined this aspect of the relationship:

"*School relationships are mostly communication. Since March, teachers' and students' mailboxes have been bursting at the seams. Well... Not every question can be asked immediately and in person. And the worst thing is that you have to wait for the answer too... In addition, when a student writes a fifth email in a few hours, in his opinion, why should he greet or say goodbye to you again? After all, you can shorter, straight from the shoulder, without these unnecessary words. After all, at school I say "good morning" to you only once a day. And the teacher? The teacher writes back with a signature, even greets and still answers the question asked.*".

During this difficult time, the surveyed teachers reported great difficulties in developing and implementing methods of working with the student, which would contribute to improving communication, school relations during time of remote learning.

"*The beginnings of remote learning in my school turned out to be a complete flop. We didn't have an electronic gradebook and a single consistent learning platform. As a result, teachers have made inept attempts to reach students in different ways. Some contacted them by email, others by messenger. There were also those who made only a good impression.*"

> "*A lot depends on the specifics of the school subject. I sympathize with everyone, but the teachers of humanities had it easier than those of general science. It's hard to imagine math or physical education classes, how to conduct them remotely, and also to remember to build the right relationship with a student who doesn't know if he/she's on the other side.*"

Teachers declared their willingness to improve school relationships, but at the same time they reported gaps within their skills and sometimes powerlessness towards students' attitudes:

> "*I often hear that students say how cool it is to lie down and eat in bed during classes. Then I wonder where it comes from. Are they bored or lack motivation? Of course, I have classes with which cooperation is great and gives me a job satisfaction. However, more often I meet with a mute presence in the ether. I am an active teacher who likes to connect with students, so remote learning is frustrating.*"

The section of the survey that was about teacher and student relations, the assumptions of the FRIS methodology were used (created by Ph.D. Anna Owczarek from 2016). FRIS® is a new Polish methodology that accurately defines and describes the natural way of thinking and acting. The diagnosis of the FRIS® Style gives an insight into the natural predispositions of the examined person, their strategies for coping with new situations, problem solving and making decisions and indicates areas where your potential can be used in the best way.

The used survey included a description of a certain situation related to school relationships and the surveyed teachers had to analyze it and propose a solution for building more favorable educational space to build the correct relationships with students and improve their mental condition.

In the group of examined teachers, based on the answers given, only three types of attitudes were distinguished, i.e. player, partner and researcher, while the methodology distinguishes four types of attitudes. None of the provided answers corresponded to the characteristics of the visionary attitude.

- PLAYER - simplifies the problem of school relations, finds one practical solution, which tries to quickly bring into force. (Facts) e.g. "*.... I guess that students are feeling worse and worse but everyone in this country is already feeling tired of the pandemic. They know they can write me an email if something serious happens.*" In the group of respondents, 9 people chose a solution that indicated a preference for the player's attitude.
- PARTNER - defines its goal in order to improve relations, finds several solutions and quickly sees their parts in common. (Relationships) e.g. "*I see a deterioration in my students' mental conditions, they lack contact with their peers, with school. I suggested to them that they could write me an email at any time, I set up an extra roster once a week to make them feel they were not alone, I was ready to talk to them about anything.*" This attitude was presented by the largest number of teachers in the study group, as many as 86 people.
- VISIONARY - treats the problem of school relations globally, quickly finds unconventional solutions. (Ideas) e.g. *No responses;*None of the surveyed teachers chose a solution that would indicate a visionary attitude.

- RESEARCHER - collects a lot of information, categorizes it, analyzes it and then just implements it. (Structures) e.g. "*I want to help students not to feel so lonely. That's why I read a lot, signed up for training, talked to my colleagues and offered my class a workshop on how to deal with negative emotions.*". Twenty teachers decided to choose the solution indicating the attitude of the researcher.

One of the respondents did not answer this question at all.

The results obtained with such a small research group do not represent a representative distribution for the entire population of professionally active teachers, but only reflect the attitudes of teachers in the study group.

While carrying out their task, teachers interact with students. The quality of these relationships is visible in the presented attitudes towards students. Teachers' attitudes are made up of three components: emotional, cognitive and behavioral. The emotional component is emotions, feelings expressed by teachers towards students. Cognitive component concerns thoughts and beliefs about the functioning of students at school in times of the pandemic, and the behavioral component concerns the undertaken specific supportive actions towards students.

The second area of school relationships, taken into account by the surveyed teachers in their responses, was relationships between the teachers themselves. It is not known from today that things are different in the teachers' rooms. J. Mastalski wrote about the toxicity of the teacher's room. Dudzikowa claimed that "*school seethes with ideas, aspirations, intentions that are clashing with themselves. This is how it was, how it is and probably how it will always be. And if so, we need interoperation, cooperation that takes into account the multiplicity of points of view and differences, and civil courage to stand up for oneself. (…) But most of all… let us not have a handle from the inside in our own heart.*" (Dudzikowa: 2002: 89)

Based on those statements, it can be assumed that the quality of relationships among teachers has never been a role model and the pandemic has revealed even more negative aspects of these relationships. This is evidenced by the statements of the respondents.

This is also evidenced by the statements of respondents, which indicate disturbed communication, lack of cooperation that often arises into conflicts, and some kind of isolation despite the need for professional contacts.

> "*Everything that so far worked well, had to be changed and revalued. It was necessary to learn new methods and ways of working and change its organization. Hanging on the phone, notorious checking of the electronic gradebook, hours in front of the computer, juggling, "how to approach a problem, how to explain it, so that students can immediately understand what is going on", for relationships with colleagues there is no time unless at the expense of family relationships.*"

All relationships in school conditions take place in some space: in the classroom, during a break, in the hallway, in the teacher's room. In their professional work, teachers establish material or personal relationships. Material ones concern formal contacts resulting from performed roles or performed tasks. On the other hand, the personal relationship enables individual treatment of another person and contains an emotional context, which may be positive or negative.

Building positive relationships between teachers is a necessary condition for developing their professionalism, which is formed as a result of observation, analysis, conversations and actions. The teacher's professional development, his/her functioning at work and in his/her personal life depends to a large extent on his/her ability to cooperate with other people.

Meanwhile, the surveyed teachers stated:

"Instead of looking for opportunities to cooperate, we are taking on us another task and facing with it individually. Now it is especially visible, as everyone locked in themselves and at home, in front of the monitor."

"Teachers who buckle down to remote lessons, train themselves, are negatively received – as a threat to others who probably want to do less."

A school as an educational institution is primarily accountable mainly for the results of education, learning outcomes: student grades, test results, exams. Meanwhile, in the humanistic approach (…), education is not the accumulation of knowledge, but a form of interpersonal communication. Without the understanding of the education subjects, it is difficult to expect progress in the student's development. (Kwiatkowska:2008:36).

Good relations among teachers require a dialogue, genuine kindness and willingness to support. Appearances in these relationships make it impossible to reach even a basic agreement.

Building proper relationships in school is the basis of the professional activity of the institution, which can be created thanks to the communication competences of the pedagogical staff. Respondents indicated to the need for continuous training in this area:

"The school management, through the lack of frequent contact with all teachers, intensifies the competition, instead of supporting the work of the team. We need trainings and we have been talking about it for over a year."

"The biggest problem in teacher relations? Conflict resolution and assertive communication. These problems have been since always, not only now."

Teachers work in changing situations related to the pandemic, which requires from them to constantly improve their work. The quality of their work is demonstrated by their professionalism manifested not only in the selection of the appropriate methods of remote education, but also in the ability to create positive relations both with students and colleagues from the teachers' room.

Summary

School relations in the time of the pandemic are an extremely difficult area of activity for the school and teachers.

The good functioning of today's modern school requires the development of an optimal model of harmonious, integrated concept of cooperation that would help

in building the correct school relationships. It is an extremely difficult task because relationships at school during the pandemic and the various constraints associated with it, are also difficult. The culture of the organization affects all its entities, so it is worth realizing how much influence teachers have on building the "relational ethos" of the school.

Every day, students must receive messages from their teachers and school management that they are all a school community and that they can count on each other.

Bogusław Śliwerski proposes a subjective, and therefore essentially personalistic approach to the relationship at school. This author points to the need for democratization in school. In a democratic school, the mutual relationships between the subjects of teaching and upbringing are based on autonomous participation, openness to individual needs and formal equality before the law and respecting them in the system of cooperating entities.

How to improve school relationships in a time when the Internet connects with those who are distant but unfortunately distanced from those who are close?

Ideally, teachers should start with themselves – they should build a positive relationship with themselves.

The slogan of teacher's well-being is becoming increasingly popular in education and it is good for it to become the "first commandment" of every teacher: first I have to take care of my own well-being, I have to take care of "recharging my batteries" – physical and mental – and only then I can take care of others and build friendly relationships with them.

It is worth betting on the method of small steps in building relationships. Teachers very often complain about too much burden – tasks, deadlines, bureaucracy. Therefore, school relationships are worth building gradually, with the help of small steps. Solutions that do not require much preparation, but only a little of time and change our habits, will work here. Introduced gradually, without a sense of coercion and over burse, they will very quickly produce great results – in improving the quality of school relations and, consequently, in improving student performance and increasing professional satisfaction.

In building correct school relationships it is also extremely important that teachers continually improve their communication skills so that "social communication in education in terms of interaction is perceived as a reconciliation of meanings with elements of the so-called feedback" (Maliszewski:2009:35).

References

Adams, K., Galanes, G.J. (2008). *Komunikacja w grupach*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Adler, R.B., Rosenfeld, L.B., Proctor II, R.F. (2006). *Relacje interpersonalne. Proces porozumiewania się*. Poznań: Rebis.

Bauer J., (2015). *Co z tą szkołą? Siedem perspektyw dla uczniów nauczycieli i rodziców*. Warszawa.

Borawska-Kalbarczyk, K. (2009). *Kompetencje komunikacyjne i dydaktyczne nauczyciela w modelu szkoły zarządzającej wiedzą*. W: K. Błaszczak.

Centrum Cyfrowe, Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii cz. I, source: https://centrumcy-frowe.pl/edukacja-zdalna/, date of access: 30th May 2021.

Centrum Cyfrowe, Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii cz. II, source: https://centrum-cyfrowe.pl/spoled/edukacja-zdalna-w-czasie-pandemii-2-edycja/, date of access: 30th May 2021.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., Morrison, K. (1999). *Wprowadzenie do nauczania*. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka.

Dudzikowa M. (2002). *Mit o szkole jako miejscu wszechstronnego rozwoju ucznia*. Kraków: Impuls.

Goleman, D. (1997). *Inteligencja emocjonalna*. Poznań: Media Rodzina.

Gordon, T. (2000). *Wychowanie bez porażek w szkole*. Warszawa: PAX.

Hattie J. (2015). *Widoczne uczenie się dla nauczycieli*. Warszawa.

Jagieła, J. (2004). *Komunikacja w szkole*. Kraków: Rubikon.

King, G. (2003). *Umiejętności terapeutyczne nauczyciela*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.

Kozyra, B. (2008). *Komunikacja bez barier*. Warszawa: MT Biznes.

Kwaśnica R. (2004). Wprowadzenie do myślenia o nauczycielu, [in:] Z. Kwieciński, B. Śliwerski (ed.) *Pedagogika. Podręcznik akademicki*, t. 2, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Kwiatkowska H. (2008). *Pedeutologia*. Warszawa, WAiP.

Leoncioni P. (2016). *Pięć dysfunkcji pracy zespołowej*. Warszawa.

Maliszewski, W.J. (2009). Interakcja komunikacyjna w edukacji – ujęcie pragmatyczne i socjologiczne. Kompetencja komunikacyjna nauczyciela w perspektywie indywidualności i preferowanych stylów uczenia się (studiowania), [in:] K. Czerwiński, W.J. Maliszewski (ed.). *Funkcje i modele komunikacji społecznej w edukacji a kompetencje nauczyciela* (p. 31–52). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.

Mastalski J. (2006). *Toksyczny pokój nauczycielski a zadania wychowawcze szkoły*. Kraków: Impuls.

McKay, M., Davis, M., Fanning, P. (2017). *Sztuka skutecznego porozumiewania się*. Sopot: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.

Nęcki, Z. (2006). Kompetencje i umiejętności komunikacyjne nauczyciela – zarys problemów, [in:] W.J. Maliszewski (ed.). *Komunikowanie społeczne w edukacji – dyskurs nad rolą komunikowania* (p. 9–12). Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.

Niemierko, B. (1999). *Pomiar wyników kształcenia*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.

Paszkiewicz A. (2014). *Skuteczna praca wychowawcza nauczyciela* z *uczniem,* Warszawa: Difin.

Peerott, E. (1995). *Efektywne nauczanie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.

Pilch, T. (ed.). (2003). *Encyklopedia pedagogiczna XXI wieku*. T. 2. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak".

Sobol, E. (ed.). (2000). *Słownik wyrazów obcych*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Śliwerski B., (2014). *Pedagogika (w) demokracji*, Tekst wykładu ukazał się w okolicznościowej publikacji: Bogusław Śliwerski. Doktor honoris causa Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin: Wyd. UMCS

Zdalne nauczanie a adaptacja do warunków społecznych w czasie epidemii koronawirusa. Warszawa 2020, source: https://zdalnenauczanie.org/, date of access: 30th May 2021.

School relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic – easy or difficult?

Abstract

Education is one of social life areas that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit hardest. This is, in addition to health care, the most important public service. Doctors save lives and health, emergency services guard safety. The role of teachers and professionals working with children and young people is not only to carry out the teaching and educational tasks of the school, but also to care about how young people cope mentally with the current situation and what their mental condition is. The pandemic has forced a change in the form of education of children and young people in schools and educational institutions. Negative effects of these are visible and basically it is reflected in the deteriorating mental health of students and teachers which are overloaded with conducting remote lessons. Students are tired, apathetic, isolated from direct peer contact. It results in difficulties with learning as well as an increase of risky behavior.

The process of teaching and education takes place in a specific environment, which nature depends to a large extent on the quality of mutual relations and interactions.

It should be emphasized that a school is not only an institution, but, above all, people establishing it, who interact with each other, with their personality, attitude and values. Members of the school community enter into specific relationships with each other and in linkages regarding mutual dependency and acted roles.

Key words: school relationship, mental condition, competences, communication, getting to know a student.

Olga Wyżga, PhD
Institute of Educational Sciences, The Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland
email: olga.wyzga@up.krakow.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-6222-8401