II. Teachers as mediators in difficult educational situations

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The role of mediation in a multicultural school

> *Real understanding is only possible*
> *when both parties understand that they speak not one but two languages, in which*
> *"the same" words have different and sometimes definitely different meanings.*
> *When they enter into a conversation aware of these differences, willing to listen*
> *to each other and ask questions, they begin to really talk and enjoy talking.*
>
> Margaret Mead (Heller, 2011, p. 3)

Introduction

The political, technical, economic changes taking place in our country, have a direct impact on the structure of society and its functioning. This significantly concerns the young generation, which is extremely susceptible to change. New content, which is the effect of expanding the life space of young people, is the source of their experiences and sensations and affects their further functioning (Rud, 2010).

Currently, our country is experiencing the greatest humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have found refuge and safe asylum in our country. They are fleeing war, persecution, torture, hunger – they are fleeing death. Poland is a country that provides assistance to thousands of them, although it does not have a long tradition and experience in receiving and helping refugees and immigrants. In Poland, where more and more immigrants are arriving, the role of school and education is extremely important. It is at school that Polish citizens should be taught from their earliest years that diversity is a value because through it we can become more open, more tolerant, and richer. At school, young people should develop the ability to see and challenge harmful stereotypes, the courage and the ability to ask questions that will allow them to better understand the world and the people they meet along the way. Visitors from foreign lands have very different backgrounds and their situation in Poland is also different. Most often, however, when talking about foreign children at schools in Poland, we think of refugees. Their presence in schools is often perceived by teachers as a difficulty (Januszewska, 2017, p. 131).

In schools with multicultural and multilingual populations, conflicts between frustrated students arise as a result of a lack of ability to find themselves in a given reality and to resolve them (Izdebska, 2007, p. 518). The situation in which the

students accidentally find themselves causes them to struggle with many problems, consequently they have to face numerous difficult situations that concern the emotional, social and cognitive spheres. Conflicts make it difficult for any individual to function in any community, causing social exclusion. Panacea in the fight against this phenomenon are formed and developed social competences. Thanks to the ability to effectively solve situations conflict and mitigating its effects, it is easier for young people to move into new social roles and situations (Polak, 2008, p. 30).

Conflict is a natural phenomenon in any functioning school. Moreover, conflicts are an inherent part of social life (Bartkowiak, 2014, p. 74). The perception of conflict has evolved significantly in recent years. Traditionally it has been perceived as a strongly negative phenomenon and has been labelled as harmful and destructive. Nowadays, however, there is a view that conflicts play a positive role and are understood as stimulating activity and motivation of individuals. Such understanding of conflict has been transferred to school where the model of creative and imaginative use of conflict situation is becoming an element of students' personal development (Koc, 2011, pp. 193–195).

Mediation has become a valuable way of resolving all disputes, done through "a voluntary agreement between the victim and the offender with the help of an impartial and neutral person – a mediator – who helps the parties to come to an agreement and brings about reparation, compensation for the damage done and/or the material and moral harm suffered (…) (Kupisiewicz, 2014, p. 180).

Mediation literally translated from Latin means to mediate a dispute. The etymology of this word translates into the totality of its influence. Mediation adheres to established standards based on certain principles, such as: the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, neutrality, acceptability, impartiality and subsidiarity, as well as the principle of professionalism. Over the years it has become a very dynamically developing method of resolving disputes of various types and origins within the structure of Polish law. It has a relatively short tradition in Poland, which unfortunately translates into low awareness of its essence and advantages. This is because not everyone associates mediation as a tool used to improve the effectiveness of interpersonal communication, reduce conflicts through dialogue, lead to amicable settlements, and reduce the time necessary to achieve mutually satisfactory solutions (Szczęsny, 2004, pp. 122–123).

Challenges of a multicultural school

School as a space of mutual interactions of various subjects of educational interaction – is a place of particular risk of conflicts and disputes. Involved in them may be, in principle, everyone who co-creates the school community (Wojtkowiak M., Wojtkowiak K., 2008, pp. 289–290).

The school of the 21st century is an institution that is open to dialogue and intercultural encounters and that addresses the problems of a globalized world.

"As a place of contact between cultures becomes a place where values are exchanged, judgments are formulated, stereotypes are verified, signs of humanity are seen in the *other/alien*, and one sees oneself as poorer for other dimensions of culture or richer for *new knowledge of the world* (Dobrowolska, 2010, p. 61).

The tasks of a modern school include preparing its teaching staff to work in a multicultural classroom, strengthening their cultural competence and preparing them to cooperate with the wider local environment in order to better integrate culturally different students into the educational institution and living environment. The school should be ready and open to the challenges it faces in educating and raising students with a migrant background (Rud, 2010, s. 4).

It is important that by: "recognizing the specific functioning of foreign students, their belief systems and references, needs and problems (Wyszyńska, Bobaj, 2009, p. 328), The school should be able to prevent school failure and social exclusion of culturally diverse students. The school should also enhance the cultural competence of Polish students; sensitize them to encounter the "Other"; teach them to live harmoniously in culturally heterogenez environments; teach them attitudes of mutual respect, tolerance, respect for human rights, dignity, solidarity, and cooperation with people of different skin color, beliefs, values, and religion (Wyszyńska, Bobaj, 2009, pp. 328–329).

As Jerzy Nikitorowicz notes: "Education is aimed at a thorough presentation of one's own culture, its values, specificity and distinctiveness, while noticing and learning about the cultures of Others, supporting them, releasing them through dialogue and cooperating in the process of mutual development" (Nikitorowicz, 2002, p. 264).

Polish educators are just learning how to work in multicultural classrooms. Although there are more and more foreign children, their presence in Polish school is still not the norm. At least two factors make their presence a real challenge for the teacher. First, foreign (and especially refugee) children come to schools at different times of the school year, appearing suddenly and disappearing just as unexpectedly. We have to accept the fact that in many cases Polish schools will not be able to organize a full educational path for such children. The only thing teachers can do is to make the best use of the time they are given. And therefore offer these children the kind of support that will make it easier for them to cope with a reality that is extremely difficult for them (Rud, 2010, p. 2).

Refugee children who are placed in Polish schools come from many regions of the world. They speak a different language, have a different culture, religion, traditions and educational experiences. In the new country they experience culture shock connected with the process of acclimatization. Some are marked by traumatic experiences of war, persecution, violence in their country of origin and fleeing to a new country. In order to overcome fear, uncertainty, distrust and disorientation in the new school environment, the teacher should create an environment that provides the student with a sense of security, stability, respect, acceptance, understanding, as well as empathy, friendship and emotional support (Jakubczak, 2010).

Foreign students manifest many difficulties in functioning in their new environment. Hence the extremely important and still underestimated role of the teacher, who should be their guide, explaining Polish customs and norms of behaviour, can encourage them to talk about the history and culture of their home country. The teacher is often the only person who can recognize a hidden talent in such a child, help develop talents, clarify misunderstandings resulting from cultural differences, reduce fear or alleviate aggression. Secondly, the attitude of immigrant children to compulsory education varies. Sometimes pupils come from families in which attending school is not a priority (Potoniec, 2009, pp. 220–222).

Problems of working in a multicultural school are also connected with teaching children who often do not speak Polish well or even at all, do not know Polish culture and customs, have such life experiences in relation to their peer group that it is difficult for them to translate them into reality in Poland. Ethnic or religious conflicts also occur and it is the teacher who has the burden of solving such situations. If teachers receive any support in this work, it usually comes from other people of good will or non-governmental organizations. However, this assistance is not always sufficient. In practice, the lack of appropriate structural solutions, i.e. support in the form of efficiently run government programs and specially earmarked public funds for various forms of assistance to multicultural schools, results in the school, on which so much depends, being left on its own (Janik, 2011, p. 10).

Foreign children often require different treatment than Polish children, among others due to low level of Polish language proficiency, specific living conditions (e.g. living in refugee centers) or due to obligatory religious and cultural norms (e.g. prayer needs). This is why it is so important for the receiving school to take care of the immigrants' specific needs. Moreover, these needs must not be seen as a problem, but rather as part of the school's responsibility to the children (Potoniec, 2009, pp. 220–228).

Special attention to the needs of foreigners may arouse surprise or protests of Polish students and their parents. This happens if Polish children are not brought up with respect for cultural differences and therefore do not understand why foreign children may need special treatment. It is the school's task to make sure that Polish parents know where and why foreign children come to Poland and to a given school. Hence, education about equal opportunities and fair treatment of all participants in the educational process is extremely important. If the school is to be a community, then Polish parents and children should also play a role in making foreign students and their families feel comfortable there.

Foreignness/otherness as a cause of conflict situations in multicultural schools in the light of the literature

The exceptional attentiveness of foreign children in this particular wartime period in schools often arouses and is a source of conflict fueled, unfortunately, still by the home environment.

Among the undesirable behaviors of school children and adolescents, aggression and school violence still occupy a dominant place. This phenomenon can be observed in all types of schools. Its causes are multifaceted and can be traced back to the family, peer and school environment as well as to individual characteristics of students. Teachers often have limited ability to mitigate or eliminate them. Extracurricular causes, in particular, escape their influence. At the disposal of teachers is the sphere of educational interventions of the school. Typical ways of dealing with aggression and violence at school are: the school's educational programmes, which should include the topics of educational lessons and extracurricular and out-of--school activities, prevention programmes, cooperation with pedagogues and school psychologists, cooperation with parents, school procedures for dealing with specific situations, and student grading systems (Woś, 2014, pp. 195–196).

Students' school aggression is transmitted primarily from outside the school and then transmitted in altered and mitigated forms within the school. School also causes it to a certain extent, but it is above all the main place where it manifests itself. It is based on unresolved conflict in social relationships. The terms aggression and violence are often used interchangeably (Gordon, 1996).

According to Krystyna Kmiecik-Baran (2000) violence is seen as a kind of destructive aggression towards another person or group. In the definition of the author: K. Kmiecik-Baran (2000) the following common aspects of violence are mentioned:

- intentionality of action – infringing the freedom and rights of an individual (group)
- causing physical and psychological harm breaking socially recognised standards of behavior (Gordon, 1996).
  The literature distinguishes different classifications of types of violence:
- hot violence (manifested by anger, rage, fury)
- cold violence (actions undertaken with premeditation) – interpersonal violence (in direct contact with people)
- structural violence (existing in social structures, consciousness, culture)
- symbolic violence (rejects other cultures and recognises the dominating culture as the only one) (Kmiecik-Baran, 2000).

Well-known models for resolving conflicts between parties are negotiation and mediation. The difference between the two is that in negotiation, the parties directly talk to each other to reach a solution, while mediation is a process in which a professionally trained person helps the parties resolve the conflict. Both methods can be used in conflict resolution at school. Mediation is a process for reaching an agreement in the event of a dispute, the need for redress. It can also serve to establish contact between the parties (Tabernacka, 2018, pp. 33–35).

Mediation, as mentioned, requires a well-prepared mediator and its effectiveness in resolving conflict depends on this. The mediator interacts with both sides of the conflict but does not impose his own solution. The goal of mediation is not to admit that either party is right, but to help find a satisfactory solution. The basic

principles of mediation are: – voluntariness of the parties to participate in the mediation meeting – impartiality of the mediator's treatment and equality of the rights of both parties – confidentiality – neutrality – the parties come to a solution on their own – acceptability – acceptance of the mediator and the procedures of the proceedings – professionalism – the mediator is well prepared – the mediator shows respect to the parties.

Mediation is a process consisting of several stages (phases) (picture 1).

In phase one, the parties to the mediation meet with each other. They agree on the rules of the meeting and subsequent meetings, which must be accepted by both parties. In the second phase the conflicting parties present their version of the events and give their reasons. They do not interrupt each other, do not use vulgarities and insults (the rule of respect for the other side). On the other hand, the mediator can elaborate on the questions, additionally clarify unclear issues and summarize them by paraphrasing. The third phase is an individual meeting of the conflicting parties with the mediator, which in principle should be kept secret. In the fourth phase, the conflicting parties meet and try to find out the position of the other party. They talk about their feelings, present their version of events and talk about the consequences. The mediator makes sure that the meeting takes place in a cultured atmosphere (Polak, 2008, pp. 32–33).
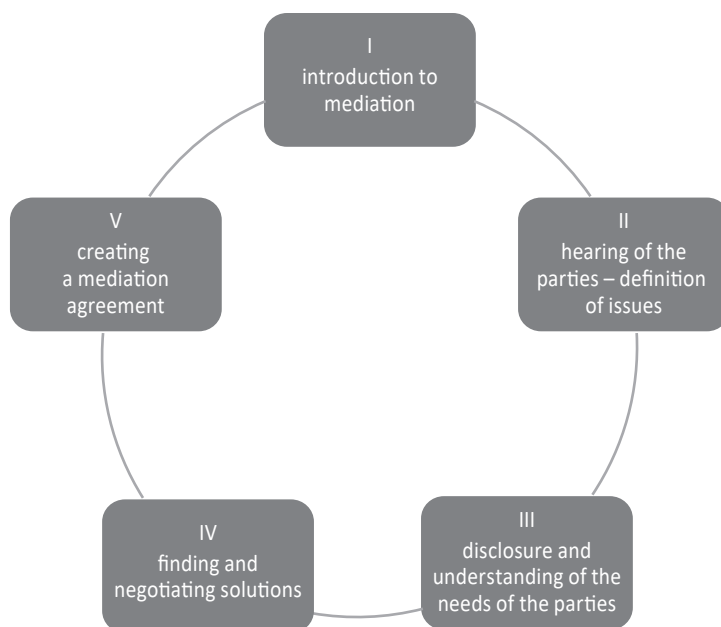
Pic. 1. Phases of mediation
Source: own elaboration based on: K. Polak (2008), Mediacja jako szansa rozwiązywania konfliktów szkolnych, [In:] Wychowanie Na Co Dzień, nr 4–5(175–175), kwiecień–maj, pp. 32–33.

The fifth phase is the search for a solution to the conflict, for compensation, for repairing the harm. The mediator makes sure that the proposals that are written down in the form of a mediation agreement are possible to fulfill and do not cause new problematic situations in the future (Polak, 2008, p. 33).

Advantages and suggestions for using peer mediation in school

Educational executives are increasingly drawn to the idea of the level method of problem solving. This method refers to looking for the right level at which to solve difficulties. It is important for the teacher to look for the lowest level of conflict resolution and not to immediately refer the matter to parents or the school management. If the problem concerns a dispute between pupils, which could be solved by mutual agreement without the introduction of superior persons, it is worth using such a solution. Implementing mediation at school, especially intercultural mediation, becomes in the long run a relief for educators who are tired of trivial problems, but it is also a method of showing students to trust (Sierota, 2019, part I, p. 27). The idea of mediation is increasingly popular among principals, especially in these times of increased migration and mixing of different cultures. The idea of peer mediation has lived to see a concrete program of implementation in schools.[1]

The goal of the program is to obtain an agreement between the parties, and often a settlement. They provide an opportunity to explore the cause of the conflict, reflect on it, and compensate for the harm done so that a similar situation does not happen again in the future (Sierota, 2019, Part I, p. 27).

A mediator in an intercultural classroom must pay special attention to language barriers that exist between conflicting parties. Very often children do not speak Polish, or do not speak it well enough to express themselves in it. This creates a lot of tension, fear and it is necessary to act especially wisely in order to break it down. Moreover, there are a lot of barriers of an intercultural nature in intercultural classrooms, which is connected with customs, habits, and the culture of the country of origin of foreign children. Religion, sensitivity to non-verbal gestures, facial expressions, voice modulation, manner of speaking, volume all have an impact as this can be misperceived by the classroom or school community (Rud, 2010).

A child from a foreign culture who speaks loudly and expressively and gestures a lot can be seen as an aggressor who shouts offensively to other children or teachers. Cultural differences, of which there are many, can be a trigger and unfortunately foreign children are equipped with such flashpoints and therefore it is important to approach them appropriately. Conflict in common parlance has a negative connotation. A mediator helps turn the negative elements of conflict into positive ones. Conflict, on the other hand, is such a dynamic moment of changing a negative into

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1 Halina Czerwińska's original prevention program Peer Mediation – the Road to Reconciliation.

a positive. A mediator helps to plan this change and then to implement it (Tabernacka, 2018, pp. 33–35).

The role of social influence of peers on the behavior of children and adolescents has long been known to educators and used as a method of education. Its basis is the perception of development in a cultural context. Through mutual communication and perception between group members, children and adolescents acquire knowledge and learn how to relate to one another. Proper peer group relationships enable intellectual, emotional, social, and moral development. Peer mediation is both a program for solving problems that arise in social relations between students at school and at the same time supports the process of social and emotional development of students. The essence of peer mediation is the understanding and resolution of conflicts by students who are in the same age group. Peer mediation usually solves smaller, but often occurring, difficulties and conflicts in social relationships. Peer mediation is part of a broader concept of peer education. Peer education is based on giving appropriately prepared students the role of teacher – guardian in the group from which they come (Leszczyńska, 2011, p. 41).

Peer education is a general strategy of educational interventions, it is also used as a form of prevention of children's aggressive behavior towards refugees/foreigners. In peer education conceived in this way, the tasks of mentor students include:

- rebuilding relationships between students,
- supporting new pupils,
- integrating isolated pupils into school life,
- helping pupils with learning difficulties with their homework,
- supporting pupils who are victims of violence (Leszczyńska, 2011, p. 41).

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American schools that have successfully implemented a peer mediation system/ program indicate a number of advantages of this method (Picture 2) (Cohen, 2005, Schmidt et al., 2010).

Peer mediation most often results in a settlement because during mediation students address not only issues related to a specific event, but also other, broader contexts related to it. Both students and mediators learn to communicate effectively, to see the consequences of their own actions, and to create and evaluate alternative solutions to problems. Peer mediation is a form of conflict resolution at school and counteracts students' aggressive behavior. Pupils develop their skills in real situations, in relation to real conflicts, making it easier for them to apply these skills in their own lives and in the wider world.

Mediation motivates students to resolve issues amicably rather than to fight, they learn how to deal with each other from peers who are mediators or parties in conflict, and they become convinced of the positive outcomes of mediation. Teachers and educators are also involved in this process, coordinating the conduct of student mediation. A pro-social, non-repressive, rules-based model of conflict resolution is used. The school community learns to be responsible for its own actions (Cohen, 2005, Schmidt et al., 2010).

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Pic. 2. Advantages of peer mediation
Source: own elaboration based on: R. Cohen, (2005), Students Resolving Conflict: Peer mediation in schools, Good Year Book; F. Schmidt, A. Treidman, J. Marvel (2010), Uczeń jako mediator, Gdynia: Centrum Kształcenia Liderów i Wychowawców ARRUPE.

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By resolving many conflicts outside of teachers' control, students gradually learn responsibility and preparation for decision-making in adult life. In contrast, mediators experience the positive effects of their actions on others; their contributions are valued by adults and other students. In the mediation process, students learn to manage an important part of their lives. As a result, those who exhibit undesirable behaviors have a chance to be included in the social life of the school. The effectiveness of mediation results in students spending more time in the classroom and teachers spending less time disciplining students (Leszczyńska, 2011, pp. 42–43).

Mediation is not used only after a conflict event, but in many cases successfully prevents the conflict from occurring or developing. Mediation, through a culture of dispute resolution, creates a specific climate in the school that encourages students to mediate when problems arise between them. Early resolution of conflicts results in the non-appearance of subsequent conflicts.

In their educational efforts, teachers strive to maintain a balance between simultaneously giving students freedom and controlling them. Mediation reconciles both needs – it provides rules and schemes within which students make their own choices (Leszczyńska, 2011, pp. 41–43).

Peer mediation can be conducted in all types of schools. Students selected as mediators must receive appropriate training (Schmidt, Treidman, Marvel. 2010).

Mediator selection can be done by students, teachers, and volunteers. Mediators must represent and reflect a cross-section of the school community and have certain characteristics such as interpersonal skills, leadership qualities, respect for others, good verbal communication, ability to listen to others, discretion and confidentiality, and willingness to participate in the program (Sierota, 2019, Part I, p. 27).

When implementing a peer mediation project, it becomes crucial to choose a coordinator from among the teachers whose tasks include: conducting or participating in the training of students, familiarizing teachers, students, parents with the idea of the program, preparing a list of mediators, supporting students with additional training if necessary, providing assistance to mediators in difficult situations, seeking solutions to problems that arise at school (Sirota, 2019, part II, p. 31).

School situations indicate that many conflicts arise without students' bad intentions or due to students' inability to anticipate the consequences of their own actions. By this It is more appropriate to undertake constructive communication between the parties than to use disciplinary regulations (Leszczyńska, 2011, p. 43).

For several years, increased interest in peer mediation as a method of resolving conflicts between students can be observed in Poland. Research conducted in 2020

by Joanna Rusinkiewicz and Łukasz Piś shows the benefits of this method perceived by teachers and students. The researched school community declared their willingness to use mediation in case of finding themselves in a conflict situation, seeing it as a way to alleviate disputes, with students presenting more positive opinions in this regard (Rusinkiewicz, Piś, 2020, p. 155). In 2019, Agata Sierota conducted unpublished research on school mediation. In the research, the author indicated that there was considerable concern among teaching staff and parents of students about this method. These concerns included: the effectiveness of the method, the inadequacy of the method for the severity of the disputes, the additional stress on the children, the separation of the mediators from the other students, and the trust of the parents and students in the peer mediator. This research also highlighted a number of benefits to the school community: the effectiveness of the method, the trust of the affected students in the mediation group, and the involvement of teachers in improving the problem situation (Sierota, 2020, part II, p. 32).

The following example testifies to the effectiveness of the school mediation method: *a boy of Ukrainian nationality (Dmytro[2], age l0) was admitted to the fourth grade in one of the schools in a village in the Podkarpackie Province. In spite of his good performance in school and in Polish, and his positive relationships in class, he was the object of bullying and ridicule by a group of his peers. Attempts to change the group's behaviour made by teachers, school counselor and the school management were ineffective. As the situation did not only concern this boy, the school decided to implement the peer mediation method. Mediators and a coordinator from the teaching staff were appointed and the mediation began. After talking with Dmytro, the mediators reached out to his bullies, and since they were his schoolmates, they were able to influence them to change their behavior towards the bullied student. In addition, the mediators encouraged the boy to help other students learn English, which he did very well.*[3] In this particular case, the mediation method proved to be more than effective.

Mediation through a culture of dispute resolution contributes to a kind of collaborative climate in the school that encourages students to mediate when disputes arise, enhances students' sense of belonging to the school community, ownership and co-determination of the school, and improves mutual communication (Sierota, 2019, part I, p. 27).

Summary

Polish school, which is currently experiencing a new change caused by the necessity of accepting refugees within its walls, at different stages of education and the necessity of adjusting school infrastructure and curricula, is facing many difficulties. One of them are conflict situations between Polish and foreign students.

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2 The name has been changed.

3 Source: the example shown is from an anonymous teacher who works at this school.

School situations indicate that many conflicts arise without students' bad intentions or due to their inability to predict the consequences of their actions and the lack of communication. To avoid them, the following actions should be implemented in a multicultural school: first, developing a pluralistic school by spreading knowledge about students' cultures and countries of origin, second, treating children individually while respecting cultural and religious differences, and third, adopting an active attitude towards students who do not speak Polish. These actions will reduce to some extent the cultural polarization between foreign and Polish students and will partly reduce the occurrence of cultural conflicts.

However, when conflicts do arise, peer mediation presented in this study is an invaluable form of conflict resolution. Mediation is helpful in helping schools fulfill one of their goals of educating youth. This perspective, however, requires that adults/educators share their power to decide for youth and not assume responsibility for them during mediation. It is also important to work with and support the student-mediator, as professionalism and adult competence are invaluable to the success of a potential mediation project (Grudziecka, 2022, pp. 7–8).

Peer mediation will not solve all school disputes. They become only an opportunity to seek agreement, minimize the effects of the conflict or reduce the manifestations of aggression and violence at school. They give young people time to reflect on their own behaviour and repair their relationships with peers (including foreigners) (Grudziecka, 2022, p. 13).

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The role of mediation in a multicultural school

Abstract

Mediation is receiving increasing attention. The number of schools that implement programs related to school mediation is growing. Mediation is one of the ways to solve peer conflicts and prevent violence. It can also contribute to the development of both students and teachers in the area of social and cognitive skills.

Every pupil differs from his/her peers in some external feature, and therefore may encounter lack of acceptance or negative attitude of the school group. The same may happen when a child differs in terms of image and culture from his/her peers or speaks Polish poorly or not at all.

Mediation helps resolve conflict situations and mitigates their effects, making it easier for students to assume new social roles at school, among peers, and in the family.

School, especially multicultural school as a space of mutual relations and interactions is a place of particular risk of conflicts and disputes. Therefore, knowledge in the field of school mediation aimed at reaching an agreement and reaching consensus on key issues may prove extremely useful (Rusinkiewicz, Piś, 2020, pp. 135–136).

The purpose of this article is to identify the role of peer mediation in the functioning of refugee children in the new school reality and to identify potential opportunities for interaction in the classroom or school group.

This article is a theoretical study which does not present specific research on the topic presented, but is an attempt to formulate new proposals for mediating activities in a multicultural school based on elements drawn from the literature on the subject.

Key words: peer group, student, conflict, refugee, stranger, mediation, peer mediation, school, multiculturalism

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