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The teacher as a mediator in difficult educational problems

Introduction

The effects of armed conflicts go further beyond population losses. They contribute to the increase in the number of people who suffered permanent physical and psychological damage as a result of the war. This causes a significant increase in disability, mental illness, suicides and pathology. Moreover, conflicts disrupt the population structure of the communities concerned.

The war in Ukraine shocked all of Europe, including Poland. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics data, Ukraine's total school-age population stands at more than 6.84 million students, from pre-primary to the tertiary education level. Ukrainian authorities have reported that in the first month of more than 733 educational institutions have been damaged or destroyed. Thank to European Union directives persons under 18 years-old could benefiting from the temporary protection status under the same conditions as their own nationals and EU citizens and move freely to EU countries (UNESCO1, 2022). Many countries responded the problem, including Poland. In the April 2022 more than 2490000 Ukrainian fled the war into Poland and 160000 children of Ukrainian refugees joined Polish schools. (UNESCO2, 2022).

It is a very difficult experience for children and young people, both Ukrainian and Polish. Teachers are also facing an extremely important challenge. How to talk to students about what is happening in Ukraine? Is this topic always worth discussing? How to support the Ukrainian minority attending Polish schools?

Proper resolution of conflict situations requires knowledge of the psychological regularities that govern them and the use of selected techniques, methods or means of conflict resolving. Among the best known is the approach "without failures" by T. Gordon, in which the point is not to prove who was right, but work for a joint resolution of the conflict.

This method brings positive effects not only in resolving conflicts, and above all in seeking solutions that are acceptable to both parties to the conflict. (Gordon, 1995; Chełpa, Witkowski, 2004; Kazimierczak, 2008).

By excluding the failure of any of the participants in the conflict, this method offers the prospect of improving the educational practice. It is very important that everyone feels satisfied. The teacher's behavior should break down stereotypes about conflicts so that the students are able to cope with such difficult situations. The method of conflict resolution is extremely important, taking into account, according to the assumptions of T. Gordon's theory, the principle of 6 steps related to:

1. Identifying the conflict and naming it
2. Showing the children that the teacher understands their feelings and needs so that they can understand themselves.
3. Common search for solutions.
4. A critical evaluation of the proposed solutions.
5. Deciding on the best solution.
6. Implementation of the decision (Gordon, 1995).

When faced with a conflict situation among students, teachers adopt various attitudes depending on their beliefs or preferences. In terms of education, the most desirable attitude of the educator towards the conflict is the creative attitude, in which the teacher tries to use a difficult situation as an opportunity to jointly analyze behaviors and attitudes, thanks to which the students can better understand and get to know themselves. Creative negotiation, resulting from the ability to think creatively, is one of the important professional competences of a teacher.

Negotiating requires a lot of goodwill from teachers, kindness to the student and negotiating skills, and above all, a creative, flexible and open attitude towards school conflicts. Principle-based negotiations aimed at reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement are difficult and require the parties to the dispute, in addition to respect for each other and their partner, understanding the essence of negotiated interests, adherence to certain rules, and a good knowledge of negotiation techniques and interpersonal communication rules. When negotiating, the teacher must see new perspectives for educational practice (Folta, 2003, Duda et al., 2019, Lubas, 2019).

The teacher's recommended activity is also to strengthen the positive atmosphere of the school and to create a friendly environment that guarantees equal access to high-quality education and is conducive to constructive conflict resolution with the use of mediation techniques (Moore, 2012; Gmurzyńska, 2009).

Students should understand what the mediation procedure is, what its purpose is, how it works and who the school mediator and peer mediator are. Such a formula should be acceptable to everyone (Jackiewicz, 2021; More, 2019).

Recommendations in this regard were presented by the Ombudsman for Children in November 2017 in the document "Standards of peer and school mediation in schools and other educational institutions". He pointed out that: *Mediation*

introduces a culture of dialogue and shared responsibility for shaping the climate at school. It is an important and effective tool of psychological and pedagogical help in work with children and youth, in accordance with the regulations of the Minister of National Education on the principles of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions. Mediation is also part of legal education at school.

The legal possibilities in this regard are specified in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 23 August 2017 on the education of non-Polish citizens and persons who are Polish citizens, who were educated in schools operating in the education systems of other countries.

When planning work in such a diverse class team, the teacher should look for answers to questions about the possibility of achieving the goals of education and methods of verifying the degree of achievement of the detailed requirements of the core curriculum, the effectiveness of the teaching and learning methods used, conducive to the development of new students' language and subject skills. Problems related to the monitoring of students' work aimed at supporting their development in the field of key competences, the development of natural interests, the inclusion of non-Polish-speaking students in the work of the entire class, as well as assessment conducive to learning will also be extremely important (Pruś, 2022).

Methodology of the research

The aim of the research was to collect teachers' opinions on the impact of the current situation in Ukraine on the teaching process, including in biology and nature lessons. The research was carried out using a diagnostic survey among teachers of primary schools in the Małopolskie Voivodeship. The on-line questionnaire contained 17 questions, including 12 closed and 5 open questions. The research was conducted in April 2022, approximately two months after the armed conflict in Ukraine began. The link to the questionnaire was sent to all primary schools in the Małopolskie Voivodeship to the school's e-mail addresses available in the Register of Schools and Educational Institutions with a request to be filled in by science subjects teachers. 123 polls were returned.

Results

Below the research results that reflect the respondents' responses to selected questions included in the questionnaire are presented.

According to teachers' indications, before the outbreak in Ukraine in February 2022, the presence of students from other countries in Polish schools, such as Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, other European Union countries than Poland, and also from outside the European Union was incidental. They were usually single learners or small groups of learners who had been involved in the educational process for

a long time. The teachers indicated that most of the students present at the school had come from Ukraine in the last three months.

Nearly 30% of science teachers believe that the conflict in Ukraine significantly or very significantly influenced the organization of the educational process at school, while nearly 50% of teachers believe that this impact was insignificant or non-existent. The majority of science teachers (55% of teachers) are also convinced that the situation has little or no impact on the organization of science teaching. Only 22% of science teachers believe that their lessons have changed significantly with the arrival of new students, while 32% of teachers believe that lessons have not changed and 26% believe that their lessons have changed only slightly.

The majority of the respondents (71%) pointed out that the appearance of new students in class teams did not negatively affect the relations between students. The teachers were of a different opinion, who indicated that they influenced very significantly 1% and significantly 4%. The motivation of students to learn is similar, in a class where children from war-affected areas study. Well, 78% of teachers say that the motivation has not decreased at all, 10% that it has partially decreased.

The presence of Polish and Ukrainian students in the lessons caused a change in working methods. Teachers decreased using the methods conveying the information (direct methods of direct instructions), and so over 21% of the respondents indicated that they do not use methods conveying the information in their work with Ukrainian students. 39% of teachers answered that they often use problem methods among Polish students, and 10% among Ukrainian students introducing them to asking questions-problems, to formulating hypotheses and verifying them in the course of mental and practical operations. As many as 33% of respondents do not use problem methods when working with Ukrainian children.

Activating methods and strategies are very popular among the teachers. Those methods of work were used in lessons by teachers very often, but more often in lessons with Polish than with Ukrainian students (46% – Polish students, 28% – Ukrainian students). 16% of teachers do not use activation methods in classes attended by Ukrainian students. The exposing methods are less often used compared to the activating methods, they are used sometimes (31% – Polish students, 32% Ukrainian students) or often (36% – Polish students, 24% Ukrainian students).

When discussing science issues, teachers use practical methods often (37% – Polish students, 28% – Ukrainian students) and very often (25% – Polish students, 21% – Ukrainian students) during lessons with both Polish and Ukrainian children. Interestingly, the scientific/IBSE methods are not used by teachers or they use them occasionally, while in the presence of Ukrainian children, as many as 67% do not use this method at all.

The teaching difficulty is the use of a variety of methods while working. Research has shown that another method that is not popular is the educational project and the flipped lesson method. 43% of respondents do not use the project method among Ukrainian children, but in lessons in which only the Polish children

participate, the method is used sporadically (31%) or sometimes (33%). The situation is similar when it comes to the flipped lesson method, 21% of teachers do not use it even when teaching Polish students, and as much as 62% while teaching Ukrainian students.

Science teachers were also asked how often they use selected teaching aids, methods and forms of work during their lessons. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of use of the chosen forms of teaching aids, methods or forms of realization by science teachers (% of teachers).

	1 (not using)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (very often)
Work in groups	2,4	16,3	19,5	19,5	21,1	11,4	9,8
Games	4,9	20,3	21,1	17,1	15,4	10,6	10,6
Tasks developing students' creativity	3,3	21,1	15,4	29,3	20,3	0,8	9,8
Film projection	1,6	4,9	16,3	22,0	13,0	23,6	18,7
Supplementing worksheets and exercises	3,3	10,6	19,5	22,0	17,1	13,0	14,6
Work with text, textbook	5,7	22,8	17,9	22,8	17,9	4,9	8,1
Outdoor activities	8,9	21,1	25,2	19,5	11,4	8,1	5,7
Observations	1,6	5,7	19,5	13,8	25,2	13,8	20,3
Illustrating experiments	4,1	15,4	17,9	16,3	19,5	13,8	13,0
Scientific experiments	15,4	18,7	16,3	18,7	22,8	3,3	4,9

The results show that students perform scientific experiments infrequently or not at all, which supports the earlier finding that teachers do not work with the scientific method or in accordance with IBSE. Experiments and observations are made moderately often and frequently in the classroom. Lessons are rarely conducted in the field. During the lesson, the textbook, worksheets and exercises are moderately often used. 43% of teachers use movies frequently or very often during lessons. Tasks developing students' creativity are carried out moderately frequently – only 30% of teachers introduce them often or very often. Teachers also use group work less frequently than more often. 5% of teachers do not use games, and 42% use them sporadically or very occasionally.

Teachers were asked to identify factors that can constitute a barrier to the integration of children from conflict countries with other students in the class. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The % of teachers' answers to the question "Please indicate to what extent individual factors constitute a barrier to the proper integration of children from countries affected by conflict with other students in the class?"

	1 (no effect)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (very strong effect)
Language barrier	8,1	12,2	15,4	11,4	8,9	11,4	32,5
The emotional state of the students	10,6	9,8	19,5	12,2	19,5	14,6	13,8
Discrepancy in program content	11,4	14,6	18,7	19,5	17,9	8,9	8,9
Reluctance from other students	38,2	27,6	11,4	8,1	7,3	3,3	4,1
No motivation	16,3	20,3	17,1	13,0	12,2	13,0	8,1
The feeling that they are only here for a moment	13,8	13,8	8,9	11,4	13,8	17,9	20,3
Reluctance to learn	23,6	22,0	15,4	12,2	9,8	10,6	6,5
The level of difficulty	22,8	23,6	15,4	14,6	13,8	8,1	1,6
other...	53,7	16,3	11,4	8,1	6,5	2,4	1,6

The results show that the most important factors influencing the proper integration of students in the classroom are: the language barrier, the emotional state of the students, as well as the students' belief that they are here for a while.

Another question concerned the individual factors that can constitute a barrier to the proper implementation of the planned goals of teaching in the field of science. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The % of teachers' answers to the question. Please indicate to what extent individual factors constitute a barrier to the proper implementation of the planned goals of teaching in the field of science.

	1 (no effect)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (very strong effect)
Language barrier	10,6	6,5	13,0	11,4	5,7	10,6	42,3
The emotional state of the students	10,6	17,9	13,8	13,8	19,5	12,2	12,2
Discrepancy in program content	7,3	17,9	13,8	13,8	25,2	4,9	17,1
Reluctance from other students	33,3	27,6	11,4	12,2	7,3	6,5	1,6
No motivation	15,4	21,1	14,6	15,4	14,6	10,6	8,1

	1 (no effect)	2	3	4	5	6	7 (very strong effect)
The feeling that they are only here for a moment	14,6	17,9	10,6	8,9	14,6	17,9	15,4
Reluctance to learn	17,9	23,6	17,1	17,1	8,9	7,3	8,1
The level of difficulty	21,1	19,5	18,7	22,8	11,4	5,7	0,8
other...	50,4	19,5	11,4	8,1	6,5	3,3	0,8

The results show that the most important factors influencing the proper implementation of the planned goals of teaching in the field of science are: the language barrier, discrepancy in the content of the teaching program, the emotional state of the students, as well as the students' belief that they are here for a while.

Work in a class team joined by children from areas affected by armed conflict shows a certain unambiguity in the responses of the respondents. 85% indicate that they engage Ukrainian students to work in groups or projects. 76% of Ukrainian students keep subject / exercise books. 81% of teachers indicate that they have different assessment criteria than Polish students. The respondents claim that Ukrainian children are treated concessionally (72%), as many as 78% of teachers believe that they should not be treated equally in terms of educational requirements. The overwhelming majority of Polish students (88% according to the respondents) help Ukrainian students and do not generate conflicts among themselves (91%). Teachers believe that every student should have the same rights to access further education.

The situation also influenced the relations between students at school. 80% of Polish students do not feel threatened by students who have joined class teams. 83% of Polish students do not generate conflicts with new students (sometimes – 15%). 78% of Polish students do not feel neglected in their lessons (sometimes – 19%). Only 8% of students are afraid that they will run out of places at school in the next stage of education. Most students (70%) do not feel any deterioration in the quality of subject education due to the current situation, while 27% say sometimes.

Teachers found that assessing children from conflict areas is partially conducive (39%) to learning. In turn, 15% of the respondents had a different opinion. Only 6% of teachers said that assessment is conducive to learning for Ukrainian children (Figure 1).

Most of the respondents monitor the work of students from conflict areas, which is aimed at supporting them in the development of key competences. 31% of teachers often monitor their work, 28% sometimes, occasionally 18%, very often – 9% (Figure 2).

There were also open-ended questions in the questionnaire. One of the questions concerned the most important problems that teachers notice with regard to the presence of Ukrainian students at school lessons. Most of the similar statements,

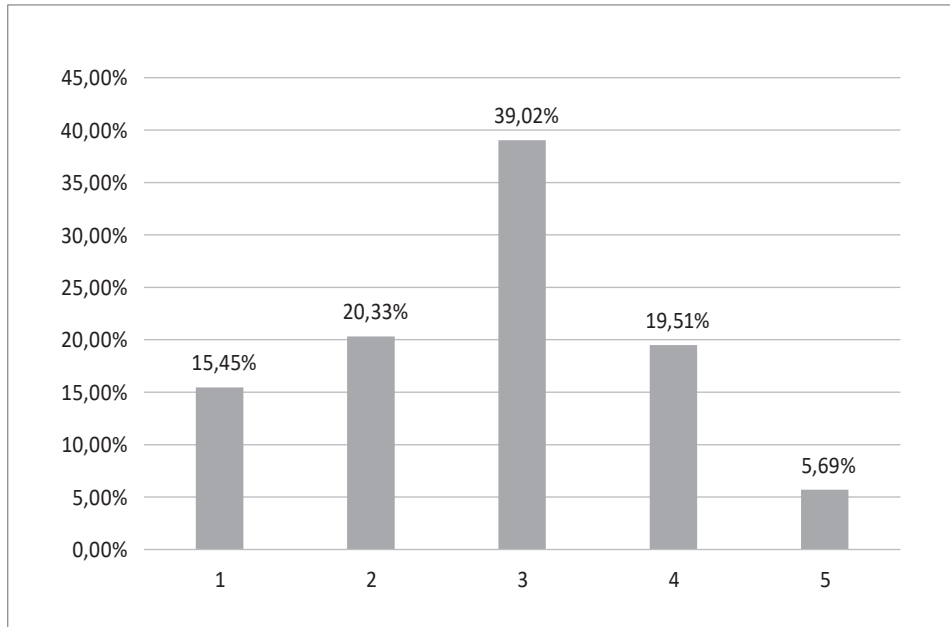


Figure 1. To what extent is the assessment of children from conflict areas conducive to learning? (1 – not conducive, 5 – yes).

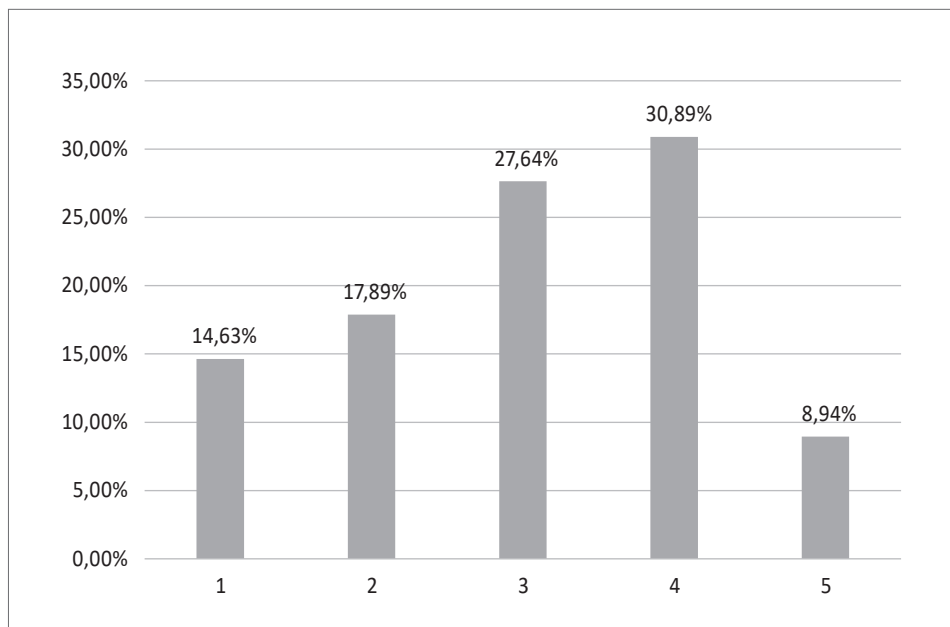


Figure 2. Monitoring the work of students from areas affected by the conflict, which aims to support their development in the development of key competences. (1 – at all, 5 – very often).

and of course understandable, was the language barrier that significantly hindered communication. An important fact, and what the teachers emphasized, are the differences in the Polish and Ukrainian core curricula, as well as the adaptation of educational requirements to the students' abilities. Apart from preparing the workshop, the teachers encountered another problems from the emotional side of the students affected by the conflict:

- uncertainty of „tomorrow”,
- retreat,
- the conviction that “they are here for a while”,
- sense of danger,
- emotional instability,
- lack of motivation.

The teachers, working with Ukrainian students, presented their developed methods that were aimed at solving the problems presented above. The help provided to students takes place in two ways, in the emotional and scientific spheres (implementation of the core curriculum). First of all, a conversation with a student, silencing negative emotions, support, cooperation with other teachers, a school pedagogue and psychologist or a language assistant were the basis for mediation in difficult educational problems. Teachers indicate that there is not enough time to become more involved in working with students from Ukraine, but if problems arise, they react on a regular basis.

Among the respondents there were also teachers who used worksheets in Ukrainian during lessons, displayed topics in Ukrainian or Russian on the board, used a translator, and helped with homework at school. Teachers indicate that they tried to diversify the educational process, praise and motivate more than usual to work. The help of other students is indispensable, helping with integration but also with understanding new messages. The participation of teachers in various training courses on working with students from Ukraine also had an impact on mediation with students. The methods of work are varied, as evidenced by the statements of the respondents:

- *Classes are carried out in Polish and English, in addition, the text in Ukrainian and Russian of what I say is displayed on the blackboard.*
- *The children do not speak Polish. We use Russian to communicate, but it is not always successful. There is a picture dictionary for communication in the classroom, printed from online materials.*
- *The work uses Ukrainian publications with a translation into Polish. Additionally, the student learns the Polish language for 3 hours a week with a Polish teacher.*
- *I cope with the cost of sleepless nights, looking for any hints on the Internet. I have a friend who knows Ukrainian and helps me translate worksheets.*
- *I can see that the initial enthusiasm has already burned out a little.*
- *I use an online translator, sometimes Ukrainian students assist with translation by who have been going to school for several months.*

Discussion

The results of the research indicate that the presence of students from the areas affected by the conflict forced teachers to adapt the methods and forms of work during the lessons. By comparing the methods of working in lessons with Polish and Ukrainian students, it was shown that activating, exposing and practical methods were used more often. The development of natural and biological content with the use of especially activating methods as well as the scientific method combined with the performance of experiments and experiments facilitates overcoming the language barrier by activating additional senses, in addition to hearing: sight, taste, touch. The teaching and problem-based methods require greater knowledge of the Polish language, so they were rarely used by teachers during lessons with Ukrainian students compared to the situation before the conflict.

Despite the language barrier, the teachers motivated, adjusted the educational requirements, and assessed Ukrainian children. As the research shows, these students conducted subject notebooks or exercises, participated in group work, and the educational requirements were different in relation to Polish students, adjusted to the students' perceptual abilities. Greater focus on working with students with language barriers, according to the respondents, did not lower the quality of subject education, and the remaining ones did not reduce the quality of teaching and the students did not feel neglected in their lessons. Ukrainian students are often emotionally withdrawn and do not generate conflicts, rather they need conversation and support from teachers, but also from their peers.

Each teacher monitors and evaluates the work of all students. Assessing Ukrainian children was conducive to their learning as well as mobilizing. The alignment of educational requirements during the assessment played a key role. Monitoring the work of students, individualization of the teaching process to a greater or lesser extent resulted in the development of key competences of students in accordance with the assumptions that the teaching and learning process is not only the transfer of knowledge and information processing, but also proper scientific communication, mediation of problems and disputes (in the case of e.g. nature and biology are many ethically, socially and environmentally important issues) as well as negotiating and adapting the environment and learning methods to the needs of students. The key competences for lifelong learning, essential for self-fulfillment and personal development, are extremely important today, as they represent the dynamic combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that the learner must develop. They include, among others competences in the selection and creation of information in the mother tongue and foreign languages, mathematical, natural and digital skills, as well as social competences (European Commission, 2018).

Successful and effective education in forms attractive to students means the necessity to constantly improve one's own competences so as to, at least to some extent, keep up with the dynamics of reality changes. The 21st century surprises us

with the pace and quality of changes in the functioning of the school, the organization of the educational process, the strategy of learning science subjects, and the role of the teacher in the process of supporting the multilateral development of students. The problem lies in understanding and implementing what is called modern education, a competent teacher of the digital age dominated by modern information technologies, computers, multimedia and the Internet.

A contemporary school should therefore be an environment of innovation, and teachers should efficiently and effectively use the opportunities offered by information and communication tools, especially in a conflict situation. A creative teacher's attitude, appearing in including proper communication into educational practice, conflict resolution skills and assertive and empathic behaviour, would be helpful as well. That communication can be realized through the mediation techniques, which are far-away from arbitrage, which used to be a natural teacher's behaviour. Used in a specific elementary school environment, mediation takes much more educational advantages for the students involved. Mediation teaches to understand own acts, to take the responsibility, it creates the sensitivity for other men's feelings and rights. The mediation seems to be a secure and effective way for creative teachers.

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The teacher as a mediator in difficult educational problems

Abstract

The current situation related to the war in Ukraine has made the presence of children from armed conflict areas, mainly foreign-language children, in Polish schools, becoming one of the main challenges facing education. Moreover, modern school becomes a place of students' rivalry and aggression. Teachers have to find their own way to handle the problem, frequently becoming a part of the conflict themselves. The problems of educating foreign children and young people require quick changes, adjusting the Polish school system to the realities. Therefore, it should be a concern of teachers to ensure appropriate teaching conditions in order to increase the educational chances of both Polish and Ukrainian students, and the inclusion of non-Polish speakers in the work of the whole class. The aim of the research carried out in March and April 2022 using the diagnostic survey among primary school teachers was to collect their opinions on the impact of the armed conflict and the current situation in Ukraine resulting from it on the course of natural and biological education. The paper presents the results of the research.

Key words: primary school, education, mediation, war

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