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Education of Early School-Age Children for Cognitive Values in the Reflections of Teachers

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

education, cognitive values, early school education teacher, reflection

The sources of the educational process include, inter alia, cognitive values that create a space in which human development takes place. Teachers' reflection on the meaning and understanding of the essence of education for values may contribute to making the effort to interpret the situation, to evaluating their educational activities and to their modification in the area of intellectual education of students at early school age. The aim of the qualitative research, embedded in the interpretative paradigm, was to determine the early school education teachers' ways of thinking about the essence and methods of educating children for cognitive values. The research problems were formulated in the form of questions: What declarative actions are undertaken by teachers in order to teach children cognitive values? The research was conducted using individual open interviews. As a result of the analysis of all the answers given by the respondents, categories of their analysis were distinguished, illustrating the essence of educating children for cognitive values in the awareness of teachers, as well as the categories of activities undertaken in this area as indicated by them. The use of the obtained research results in the practice of early school education may contribute to creating the conditions for assigning the proper meaning to cognitive values in the upbringing of children.

Introduction

A characteristic feature of contemporary life is the uncertainty of social situations in which people have come to live. Facing and experiencing conflict of cultures, ideological pluralism and relativism of values, an individual is often unable to define his or her role in the social environment. Orientation in the world of values has become the basic challenge of each human being (Maksymowicz 2013: 14). Therefore, teachers' task in today's world is helping their students to:

[...] explore their own capabilities, understand the world, themselves and other people through the development of empathic attitude, emotionality, sensitivity and non-schematic thinking, and above all to prepare them for proper and responsible evaluating and a life lived according to selected values that do not collide with the values of other people (Świtała 2019: 171).

Due to the fact that the implementation of educational activities refers to "specific areas of social reality that highlight their typical content" (de Tchorzewski 2018: 155–156), several areas of education are distinguished. One of them is intellectual/mental education, singled out due to cognitive values underlying the upbringing process. In the contemporary world, full of contradictions and characterized by information chaos, "the proper undergoing of intellectual upbringing turns out to be an issue of utter importance, so that a person, who is shaped intellectually, could learn" (Rembierz 2013: 71). The aim of upbringing understood in such a way is equipping a person with knowledge based on truth, but "reaching this value is not achieved through receiving it directly, but through experiencing and understanding it" (de Tchorzewski 2018: 156–157).

The goal of this article is presenting, based on qualitative research, various methods of conceptualizing the essence of upbringing early school-age children to cognitive values by early education teachers and presenting their declared actions undertaken in this regard. By making upbringing to cognitive values the subject of analysis, the article fits into the trend of research focused on the search for the possibility of changing the practice of early childhood education towards creating a space in the first grades of elementary education in which a child, who is intellectually formed, will be able to learn.

Around the essence of cognitive values in upbringing of children

The upbringing process is based on certain values. For the purpose of this paper, a broad understanding of the discussed issue has been adopted as: "what is valuable,

worth desiring and is (should be) an object of special concern and the goal of human endeavor, as well as criterion of human conduct” (Chałas, Łobacz 2020: 17). Values are, therefore, strictly related to human needs and to the desire to satisfy them. Moreover, “values meet needs, rooted in individuals and groups, to search for and achieve goals. Their discovery and affirmation are a part of the process of confirmation derived from unanimous recognition” (Zielińska-Kostyło 2008: 120–121). The key role in the process of recognizing and creating values is played by the subjectivity of an individual.

The category of values stays closely related to upbringing understood as “introducing a person into a valuable life” (Skrzypniak 2001: 149–150). Katarzyna Olbrycht (2012) considers the essence of upbringing to values in a broader and narrower aspect. In the first sense, she identifies education to values with axiological education. Its goal is to prepare a person to consciously function in the world of values. In other words, to acquire competence in the field of noticing, choosing, selecting, implementing and creating values. In the narrower scope, upbringing to values includes creating in a person an understanding and readiness to accept values desired from the perspective of an introduced educational program, as well as motivation to live according to those values.

The source of the upbringing process includes, among other things, cognitive values that create a space where human mental development takes place. As Kazimierz Denek states, “cognitive values are based on truth. [...] The truth in itself is both the goal and the essence of knowledge” (Denek 2015: 35). Equipping a person with knowledge based on truth is the core of the intellectual upbringing process (de Tchorzewski, 2018). The characteristics describing knowledge as a value in the upbringing process include (apart from truthfulness): clarity, transparency and order (Spanbauer 1987). The essence of intellectual education can also be seen in shaping specific attitudes, such as:

- a) independent thinking and criticism, and, as a consequence, the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood;
- b) understanding oneself and the surrounding reality;
- c) selectivity towards various sources of knowledge different from one another, and referring to those that are credible and not limited to the transmission of more or less reliable information;
- d) cognitive and exploratory passion; making systematic and longer intellectual efforts;
- e) enthusiasm and fantasy; feeling that knowledge, science and truth become essential elements of life, a habit, a pleasure, and a goal (Myszkowska-Litwa 2007).

Particular importance is also attributed to cognitive values related to knowledge based on truth, such as: wisdom, reflectiveness (Jedliński 1998), inventiveness, creativity (Suchodolski 1987), fruitfulness of cognition, inquisitiveness, novelty (Kubin 2006); freedom (Gadacz 1993) or responsibility (Ingarden 2006). Upbringing focused on the above-mentioned cognitive values forms the basis for shaping and developing in children proper attitude towards knowledge as a tool to understand the world and face new civilization challenges.

Introducing the child into the world of cognitive values as an educational challenge

According to current psychological and sociological approaches to childhood, the basis of the process of upbringing to cognitive values includes perceiving children as committed actors of social life; as active subjects gathering and reinterpreting experiences, and shaping the surrounding world (Corsaro 2015; Nelson 2007). The basic task of adults is “mindfulness towards the child’s mind” expressed in treating a little human being as a separate, full-fledged person with their own needs, emotions, desires and beliefs, and to encourage him or her to reflect upon their own thinking and behaviors (Pikul-Białocka 2012: 132). The subjectivity of a child is the basis of effective upbringing in the child’s process of entering the world of cognitive values. The road of implementation of this upbringing leads first and foremost through generating situations, events and processes that can be characterized by reciprocity (Skrzypniak 2001) based on the activities of the child and their social relations with peers.

In the process of upbringing to cognitive values the key roles are played by personality and competences of the teacher who “first has to discover himself, the truth and values, so that later he could invite the student-pupil to enter the dialogue with the values that he would like to suggest” (Chrobak 2013: 182). The relations between the teachers and the students, based on respecting the dignity of the subjects of the upbringing process, should form an integral element of everyday educational life.

Procedure and research results

The aim of the qualitative research, embedded in the interpretive paradigm, was to determine the ways of thinking of teachers about the essence and methods of educating children at an early school age to cognitive values. As Jolanta Zwiernik emphasizes (2015: 90–91), in the interpretative approach, words are the research data on which the researcher’s attention is focused. It is thanks to the statements of the respondents that it is possible to gain insight into the meanings given by the informers to the

events in which they participate. Thought and reflection play a significant role in the teaching profession, because they make it possible for a teacher to reconstruct the experience and enable him or her to understand the meaning of their participation in the educational reality (Łukasik 2014). As a result of the qualitative analysis of answers given by 23 early education teachers during open interviews conducted with them, the answers to the following questions were sought:

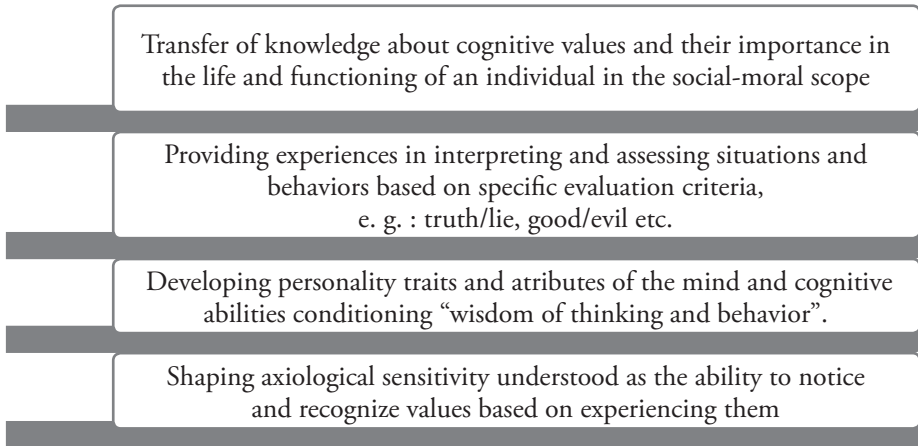
1. What is the essence of the process of upbringing to cognitive values according to the teachers participating in the study?
2. What actions do teachers declaratively undertake with the goal of upbringing children to cognitive values?

The open interview used in the research is defined as “an interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. The interviewer does have a general plan of action, but it is not a specific set of questions that have to be asked while using specific words in a fixed order” (Babbie 2008: 342). The research was conducted directly by the researcher in the period between November 2021 and April 2022. The choice of interviewees was intentional. Efforts were made to combine contrasting cases in a targeted sample. The decision to cease conducting more interviews was made when it was believed that the collected data suggest categories, and their new contexts ceased to appear in the respondents’ responses (Hammersley, Atkinson 2000). Only women participated in the research.

At the stage of processing the data, in the content of all interviews, categories of their analysis were distinguished, illustrating the essence of educating children to cognitive values in the awareness of teachers, and the categories of activities declared by them. As a result of the qualitative analysis of the responses, emerging tendencies of teachers towards the subject discussed were identified. The analysis of empiric material obtained in the course of the research conducted on small groups of people is of qualitative nature and does not require statistical tools. However, the possibility of using quantitative terms in projects of a qualitative and explanatory nature is indicated. David Silverman justifies such approach as follows: “Simple calculation techniques may become a way to probe the entire set of data, which usually gets lost during intensive qualitative research” (2008: 62).

The attempts to describe the essence of upbringing towards values undertaken by the surveyed teachers, referred to several categories of answers. However, it is important to emphasize that the division into categories is not mutually exclusive. Each separate way of understanding the concept by the teachers is related to the values indicated by them. Those values lie at the base of the upbringing process and declared activities used with the purpose to practically implement the idea of education towards cognitive values.

Scheme 1. Conceptualization of the concept of upbringing to cognitive values by the surveyed teachers



Source: the author’s own interpretation based on the research.

The conducted analysis of the research material allows us to conclude that all of the surveyed teachers declaratively find it very important to educate children to cognitive values. As a result of the analysis of responses in terms of understanding the essence of this process, the following categories were distinguished:

- a) Transfer of the knowledge about cognitive values and their importance in life and functioning of an individual considered mainly in the social-moral scope.

The vast majority of the respondents (20 people) see the essence of their educational activities in the discussed area in equipping children with knowledge about values such as e.g.: truth, knowledge, i.e. values that lie at the base of social-moral norms that condition functioning of the child in life and education according to expectations and requirements of the society. Thus, the teachers narrowed the scope of the concept in question mainly to those skills and information that refer to children’s ethical behavior in social relations in school and outside of school. The way of implementing education to cognitive values understood in the above mentioned manner leads through the following activities declared as implemented by the teachers in their school practice:

- providing children with examples, role models, directing their attention towards behaviors of their peers as well as adults in school which can/should be the subject of modeling (18 respondents);

- reading stories, fairytales, books, and directing children's attention towards the valuable behavior of the characters and discussing it (16 respondents);
- presenting cartoons and educational movies showing various situations and social issues in order to show the world of cognitive values and the importance of having knowledge (14 respondents);
- presenting everyday situations showing various types of interpersonal relations connected with cognitive values (12 respondents).

The subject matter of the above-mentioned educational actions as those which are actually implemented makes it possible to show the importance of cognitive values for a human being in the individual and social scope. The emphasis, however, is put primarily on the intellectual component of children's attitude towards values.

- b) Providing experiences in interpreting and assessing situations and behaviors based on specific evaluation criteria, e. g.: truth/lie, good/evil etc.

The second distinguished category of statements (15 respondents) underlines the importance of organizing activities, with authentic participation of children, that facilitate experiencing cognitive values in the process of upbringing. In the opinion of respondents, the essence of education to cognitive values lies in providing children with opportunities to interpret and evaluate situations and behaviors based on specific evaluation criteria e.g.: truth/lie. The children themselves participate in these events. In this case, the key role is played by the activities organized by the teachers and aimed at shaping skills and competences in children in the scope of evaluation through:

- the analysis of relations among children in the classroom based on discussion (10 respondents);
- the purposeful design of educational situations in the form of role-playing, drama, etc., that require making decisions and interpreting them based on specific criteria (12 respondents);
- using spontaneous classroom situations e.g. conflicts between children, in order to analyse and evaluate consequences, benefits derived from particular decisions and accepted solutions (9 respondents);
- teaching children taking responsibility for their decisions and behaviors that are incompliant with social and moral norms (7 respondents).

In the justifications for undertaking the above-mentioned educational activities, the need for the teacher to refer to everyday experiences of children and to activate them comprehensively due to the specificity of the development phase was emphasized.

- c) Developing personality traits, attributes of the mind and cognitive abilities conditioning "wisdom of thinking and behavior".

In the opinion of fewer respondents (13), the process of upbringing to cognitive values is a holistic task and should be based not on transferring knowledge about cognitive values but on shaping specific attitudes towards knowledge and helping children achieve “life wisdom”. Upbringing understood in this way, directed towards such values as: knowledge, wisdom, reflectiveness, etc., requires the proper use of intelligence, abilities and creativity in creating and implementing various problem solutions. The way to achieve them leads through organizing and implementing activities declared by the teachers:

- motivating children to acquire knowledge on their own and making them aware of the importance of knowledge in achieving life success (13 respondents);
- analysis, critical thinking and practical activities in the process of understanding the meaning of importance of cognitive values and related standards of conduct (12 respondents);
- developing children’s creativity through innovative problem solving and encouraging them to express their opinions and judgments on various situations and problems (11 respondents);
- discussions on current social problems (9 respondents);
- underlying the need to use the acquired knowledge for a good purpose in order to change and improve the surrounding reality (8 respondents);
- building positive self-esteem and self-confidence (7 respondents).

The aim of such educational situations is helping the child “grow to wisdom”.

d) Shaping axiological sensitivity understood as the ability to notice and recognize values based on experiencing them.

The last distinguished category of responses (10 people) emphasizes the meaning of the emotional component of children’s attitude towards cognitive values. In order to justify their point of view, in their answers the respondents emphasized that children at that stage of development are characterized by great emotional sensitivity. That is why, the quality of educational actions is increased by the ability to arouse positive emotions such as: joy, curiosity or amazement that accompany these activities. Proper emotional atmosphere created by the teacher significantly facilitates eliciting various values, including cognitive ones, that are intertwined into the implemented contents.

The respondents declared undertaking the following actions aimed at shaping children’s sensitivity towards cognitive values:

- creating problematic situations related to cognitive values with a strong empathetic element, encouraging children to identify problems (9 respondents),
- facing children with conflict of cognitive values and thus provoking curiosity, amazement etc. (8 respondents);

- asking questions stimulating noticing life, civilization and social problems etc. related to cognitive values (7 respondents).

This group of respondents see the child in a holistic way as an active subject emotionally engaged in the upbringing process.

The research conducted in recent years regarding the place of cognitive values in the hierarchy of values of early school-age children (Pawelec, Artymial et al. 2017; Łukawska, Prażmowska-Bartoszek 2019) shows that values such as truth or wisdom are ranked quite low among others. In turn, teachers and candidates for the profession declare in surveys (Dakowicz, Laskowska 2021) that cognitive values related to the pursuit of knowledge are among the most important ones that they intend to teach children in the future. Referring the above-mentioned research results to the analysis of early education teachers' opinions obtained for the purpose of this article, it can be concluded that they are aware of the need to educate children to cognitive values. However, educational methods related to the discussed area, which become of particular importance, are the methods that take into account the subjectivity and creativity of children, and that not only lead to the improvement of their intellectual abilities and the cognitive sphere of development, but also activate "cognitive interests and needs, intellectual anxieties and questions, tension of the will in pursuit of the truth" (Suchodolski 1987: 279).

Summary

There is no doubt that "a man experiences many different values in almost every life situation" (Furmanek 2014: 14–15). Therefore, upbringing to values is a very complex process. Introducing a child into the world of values requires from the teacher presenting the values to the students, and enabling them to understand them "so that the pupil could implement them in his or her project of life while building his/her own and, at the same time, appropriate hierarchy of values" (Buk-Cegiełka 2018: 132). Cognitive values such as: wisdom and knowledge, that are associated with inventiveness and creativity, reflective thinking etc., gain special importance in the educational process, because of the specific features of modern life that requires from us the competences such as: openness to change, cognitive independence, critical thinking, etc.

Based on the analysis of the obtained research results, it can be concluded that teachers of early school education declaratively attribute special importance to upbringing children to cognitive values. The view that dominates among the respondents sees the essence of such upbringing in the axiological aspect as a cognitive category which is about transferring knowledge on cognitive values and making children

aware of their importance in life. The teachers declare undertaking specific activities in this area, which mainly include providing children with examples and role models (real or fictional), and present examples of everyday situations illustrating socially expected conduct compliant with cognitive values.

Contrary to the above described approach, which is characterized by quite an objective perception of children, the other distinguished category of teachers' responses sees the essence of upbringing to cognitive values in the process of gathering experiences by the children, as such experiences constitute the basis for opening up to the world of cognitive values and accepting them. Thanks to situations created by the teacher that trigger activeness, the child gains experience in building their own system of values, in understanding, assimilating and internalizing norms. In compliance with the currently promoted approach to childhood, more than a half of the respondents emphasized the need to create conditions for the harmonious development of each child in the process of upbringing to values in accordance with his or her individual capabilities and innate potential. In this case, the teacher is perceived as a child's companion on the way to truth, knowledge and wisdom, who creates educational situations that facilitate the development of creativity, reflective thinking and cognitive independence.

It is noteworthy that some of the teachers, in their way of defining the concept, put emphasis on the importance of emotional involvement and experiencing in the process of learning, understanding and incorporating certain cognitive values into the structure of their own experience. According to this group of respondents, the process of upbringing to cognitive values should include axiological sensitivity, the joy of discovering values and cognitive satisfaction. As a result of the analysis of the teachers' responses, it can be observed that none of them paid attention to the importance of establishing the purpose and meaning of cognitive values in peer contacts through children's sharing their personal knowledge and experiences from their lives outside of school (Kochanowska 2018). Meanwhile, a child treated as a subject "[...] is perceived as an active social actor, who is a unique, complex and individual being that constructs his or her own individuality, social relations and social networks, rich in the opportunities to act socially and participate in their own development" (Bałachowicz, Witkowska-Tomaszewska 2015: 108). Thus, the autonomy of both the teacher and the student determine the effectiveness of the process of upbringing children to cognitive values.

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