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# Shaping Social and Emotional Competences of Children at an Early School Age Using the Good Behavior Game Program

Kształtowanie kompetencji społeczno-emocjonalnych dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym z wykorzystaniem programu Good Behavior Game (Gra w Dobre ZachowaniA)

#### KEYWORDS

#### **ABSTRACT**

Good Behavior Game, an early school age, social and emotional competences, classroom management At every stage of human development, a significant goal of modern education, both formally and informally, is to prepare or increase the level of a person's adaptation to independent functioning in the society. It is based on the development of key competences (hard and soft ones), taking into account the components of knowledge, skills and experience. The earlier children start shaping them, the better the effects will be when the students acquire socially expected behaviors and attitudes. The article outlines the context of the implementation of the American program called Good Behavior Game (GBG) implemented in Polish schools as Gra w Dobre ZachowaniA (GDZ). Its main assumptions and methodology of application are described. The areas of its effectiveness that relate to the ways of shaping various aspects of the social and emotional functioning of the child at the beginning of his educational path were also indicated. The GBG program implemented in primary schools, included in the list of programs recommended by PARPA1, belongs to the category of activities

PARPA: since January 1, 2022 is the National Center for the Prevention of Addictions.

supporting education which definitely facilitate the formation of a set of competences constituting the content of expected attitudes. GBG/GDZ makes it easier for children who are just starting school to take up the role of students. For the teacher it is a proven tool for effective behavior management in the classroom, and in the long-term context it allows for the reduction of the frequency of risky behaviors in later adolescents and young adults.

#### SŁOWA KLUCZE

#### **ABSTRAKT**

Good Behavior
Game, Gra w Dobre
ZachowaniA,
kompetencje
społecznoemocjonalne,
młodszy wiek
szkolny, zarządzanie
klasa

Znaczącym celem współczesnej edukacji realizowanej zarówno formalnie, jak i nieformalnie na każdym etapie rozwoju człowieka jest przygotowanie go lub zwiększenie poziomu adaptacji do samodzielnego funkcjonowania w społeczeństwie. Opiera się ono na ukształtowaniu kluczowych kompetencji (twardych i miękkich) uwzględniających komponenty wiedzy, umiejętności i doświadczenia. Im wcześniej rozpocznie się ich kształtowanie, tym lepsze efekty przyniesie nabywanie przez uczniów społecznie oczekiwanych zachowań i postaw. W artykule zarysowano kontekst realizacji amerykańskiego programu Good Behawior Game (GBG), w polskich szkołach implementowanego jako Gra w Dobre ZachowaniA (GDZ), jego główne założenia i metodykę stosowania. Wskazano również na te obszary jego skuteczności, które odnoszą się do sposobów kształtowania różnych aspektów społeczno--emocjonalnego funkcjonowania dziecka na progu jego drogi edukacyjnej. Program GBG realizowany w szkołach podstawowych, wpisany na listę programów rekomendowanych przez PARPA<sup>2</sup>, zalicza się do tej kategorii działań wspierających edukacje, które zdecydowanie ułatwiają kształtowanie zestawu kompetencji stanowiących treść oczekiwanych postaw. Dla dzieci rozpoczynających szkołę GBG/GDZ stanowi ułatwienie odnalezienia się w roli ucznia, dla nauczyciela jest sprawdzonym narzędziem do efektywnego zarządzania zachowaniem w klasie, a w kontekście długofalowym pozwala zredukować czestotliwość zachowań ryzykownych u późniejszych adolescentów i młodych dorosłych.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Z dn. 1.01.2022 r. na mocy ustawy z dn. 17 grudnia 2021 r. o zmianie ustawy o zdrowiu publicznym oraz niektórych innych ustaw (Dz. U. 2021, poz. 2469) Krajowe Biuro do Spraw Przeciwdziałania Narkomanii i Państwowa Agencja Rozwiązywania Problemów Alkoholowych zostają przekształcone w Krajowe Centrum Przeciwdziałania Uzależnieniom (Jabłoński, 2021).

#### Introduction

Both personal and professional success depends on the ability to use highly developed competences understood as a relatively permanent stock of knowledge, skills, experiences, and ability to actively apply them to one's own activities. It is the responsibility of parents to ensure that the process of shaping these skills starts as early as possible. Parents are also supported in this by school and teachers. This is because they have unlimited possibilities to both stimulate the development and verify the level of acquisition of these skills by pupils in different contexts of school and life functioning. As early as in 1993 Fullan argued that it is the professionalism of teachers that contributes to the quality of school development. He attributed particular importance to the development of the leadership potential of teachers, fulfilled at the stage of their education and later also professional training. This is because, by building a culture of collaboration and organising a space for mutual learning in the school/class/group, such potential may help to create a community of individuals pursuing common goals (Kałużyńska, 2018). Moreover, educational leadership carried out by teachers in the classroom is, as argued by Leithwood et al. (2008), the second (after teaching) most important factor that influences student learning. The Good Behaviour Game (GBG) programme provides opportunities to develop students' emotional and social competences. It also makes it possible for teachers to improve their leadership role in creating optimum conditions for student learning.

# About the GBG programme: assumptions and methodology of application

Good Behaviour Game is a programme of universal prevention the effectiveness of which was confirmed scientifically (Ashworth et al., 2020; Bradshaw et al., 2009; Harris and Sherman, 1973; Ford, 2015; Kellam et al. 2008, 2011). The programme originates from the USA and it is also successfully fulfilled in many countries of the world. It puts special emphasis on protective factors often described in the literature of the subject (Borucka & Ostaszewski, 2008; Fergusi Zimmerman, 2005; Ostaszewski, 2014; Stoverink et al, 2020), such as school achievements and lack of tolerance for breaking social norms. Thus, its application can contribute to building those resources in students that, when confronted with risk factors, will activate a protective barrier against risky and/or undesirable behaviour (Kwatera et al., 2021; Poduska et al., 2008.

In Poland, thanks to the cooperation of the American Institute for Research and the Polish "Hidden Wings" ["Ukryte skrzydła"] Foundation, the programme has been

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implemented under the name *Good Behaviour Game* since 2017<sup>3</sup>. It is addressed to students of younger school age starting formal education, and to their teachers. It makes it possible to reduce the occurrence of risky behaviours and to shape many soft competences in pupils without the need to introduce new content to the *curriculum* understood as content included in the general education core curriculum, which is the basis of the curriculum implemented in an integrated manner in classes 1-3 of primary school. This is possible as a result of activities based on the construction of simple expectations, on attaching great importance to their proper understanding, and on consistent application of this approach by children in various school and out-of-school situations.

In the classroom of each playing class there are clear, large-format charts in a place visible to all children. They contain four general rules of work: "we work quietly and calmly", "we are polite to each other", "we leave our seats with permission", "we work according to instructions". The same rules are attached to each student's table. The very fact that they are present in the room during non-Game activities encourages the teacher to refer to them at any time. The idea is that children learn and apply the rules of good behaviour in the context of the Game and then, thanks to extrapolation made with the teacher's help, also during other school activities, breaks, canteen or library visits. The highest level of advancement in the Game is the display of desirable behaviour and the elimination of inappropriate behaviour, also outside the school premises, at home, on trips, on means of transport, or in public places.

In the first 6-week phase of the implementation of the game, which is called *pre-implementation*, the children, with the help of the teacher, learn to understand the four principles correctly. To make this possible and easy, they identify, first together with the teacher and then on their own, the positive and negative behaviour connected with each principle. This, in turn, is reinforced by the valuing exemplifications of specific manifestations of behaviour related to each principle, together with the indication of various contexts in which they may occur. At this stage, the teacher gets to know and watches the pupils, so that he/she can later assign them to teams of several pupils, balanced in terms of gender, abilities, type of dominant behaviour, temperaments, and previous group relationships. Apart from the classroom rules, these factors form the second of the four basic methodological pillars of the Game. The remaining factors include positive reinforcement (praise, rewards, celebration of victories, confirmation of victories in personalised Good Behaviour Books) and monitoring children's behaviour by the teacher, as well as monitoring children by other children.

<sup>3</sup> Project: "Supporting the piloting/implementation of a prevention programme in the area of social skills development in early childhood", co-financed by the National Health Programme for the years 2016–2020. Task No. 10/28/3.2.1.1/17/DRM.

The teacher also undergoes self-evaluation on the basis of analytical tools (self-analysis sheets). The teacher's actions, in turn, are supported and monitored (every two weeks) by a coach who (each time) prepares feedback on the basis of the actions and reflections of the teacher himself.

In the seventh week, the *implementation* stage begins. It consists in the team members following the rules learned and reminded before each game, during sessions of a few minutes at first, which are extended over time. The children carry out the tasks from the curriculum, either individually or in groups, in a room arranged (by the children) for team work. All instructions to the tasks, their explanation, answers to pupils' questions, verification of pupils' correct understanding of the instructions, or of the successive stages of work on the task, take place before the announcement of the beginning of the Game. During the Game, until the end is announced, the teacher does not interact verbally or non-verbally with the students who are working on the task independently or in a group. The teacher only monitors their behaviour, announcing any episodes of rule-breaking by a particular group and noting this on the wall scoreboard in the form of a minus. After receiving (as many as) four minuses, the team loses the game, as a result of which it also loses the chance to receive a prize. The winning team(s) celebrate(s) the victory by choosing a social prize<sup>4</sup> or a material prize<sup>5</sup>. After the celebration, critical insight into past action takes place on the carpet through the students' self-reflective discussion on their behaviour (in particular teams). The students talk about the reasons for losing points/losing the Game, about the quality of the undertakings necessary to win the Game the next time by refraining from inappropriate behaviour, and, above all, the students express their appreciation of self-discipline of the winners, pointing out those behaviours that led the team to victory. Reflexivity in relation to action, especially such as experiential learning, is particularly appreciated by contemporary didactics. It also constitutes an important competence that is being formed in the consciousness of modern societies, finding expression in the ability to think critically about the reality (Giddens, 2001). It is through reflexivity that both learners and teachers see their experience in a new light and develop a new perspective of knowledge about the experience and themselves. The self-analysis session is followed by further activities arising from the day's agenda, but according to the approach: "the game is over, but compliance with the rules continues", which is to contribute to the consolidation of the desired attitudes.

<sup>4</sup> E. g. additional time for computer classes, favourite activity, going to the school playground during the break, stamp on one's hand made with a marker that smells nice, etc.

<sup>5</sup> E. g. a sticker, pencil, balloon, notebook, etc.

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Social-emotional competence as a practical dimension of attitudes

In the classic view of G. W. Allport (1935), an attitude is a mental and nervous state of readiness organised by experience and influencing the individual's reactions to objects and situations with which he/she is in a particular relationship. Refining this definition with the most frequently cited scheme by B.M. Smith (1947; after Mika, 1982) allows for the inclusion of three types of elements in an attitude: cognitive, affective and action ones. This, in turn, facilitates the application of a theoretical reference in the form of specific and purposeful teacher interventions to the process of shaping in pupils the competences and attitudes that are socially expected and fulfilled in the process of upbringing and socialisation.

The primary role of the child as a member of the family is related to the first environment of the child's life. Another, environmentally significant role, is that of a peer group member and a student. In each of these there are clearly defined tasks, embedded in the social expectations associated with their fulfilment. They are understood as social facts which are relatively unchangeable elements of culture in a given society (Giddens, 2006), and can be internalised in a passive way, consisting only in reproducing the described or modelled behaviour. However, the passivity of role-playing does not exhaust the possibility of their acquisition; it is also necessary to take into account the activity of the individual through which he/she externalises the behaviour associated with it through his/her emotional attitudes and social interactions. Already J. Dewey (1923) wrote that we are able to discover and learn when we act and reflect on what we do, i. e. when we are engaged in cognitive activity. It was also confirmed by J. Bruner (1961), pointing out that learning is not a passive process, but requires the learner to really focus his/her attention on the objects or social facts being learned. He negated the (still) dominant positioning of the student in the role of a "desk-bound listener", passively assimilating (usually by heart) the knowledge that the teacher had previously assimilated. Nowadays, it is known that active listening, discussing, reading, observing or reflecting on what the learner has already encountered, what he or she has done, and, above all, acting on the basis of knowledge, intuition and experience, are significant in the learning process, because these types of activity bring the best and most durable results, especially when they co-occur (Schön, 1992; Westbury et al, 1999). If we want our students to solve diverse problems effectively, we need to create an environment for them to explore together, discover, draw conclusions, share knowledge and learn from each other. First, such environment should be created in a laboratory (school) setting related to the organisation of learning by doing (Carini Sund,1989). With this, the students will be able to function in an optimum manner in different situations in life (outside school). This approach, initiated by Dewey and developed by his great successors up to the present day, is also reflected in the implementation of the Good Behavior Game (GBG) project.

References to the approaches of 20th century researchers are not coincidental. These references go back to the conceptualisation of the GBG project when, in the 1960s, Kansas University researchers: H. H. Barrish, M. Saunders and M. M. Wolf (1969) designed activities focused on developing teachers' skills in the context of precise and consistent instruction of primary school students in expectations and behaviours in the classroom that are appropriate and desirable. These include adhering to established rules of behaviour, extending time to focus attention on a task, completing work that has been started, developing cooperative skills or building positive group relationships through specific, unambiguous and easy-to-understand teacher messages (Kellam et al., 2011). Simple rules for pupils to function together from the beginning of their school education allow for the acquisition of social and emotional competences that will improve with age. The rules that are to be followed during the Game and later also outside the Game (and outside school) include expectations such as: treating others with respect and without prejudice, communicating effectively with them, taking initiative in dealing with others, cooperating in a group without conflict, dealing with tensions in relationships with others, overcoming fright and shyness, solving conflicts, justifying one's own opinion, assertively expressing one's feelings and beliefs, self-reflection or dealing with criticism. The programme thus contributes to the students' ability to regulate both their own behaviour and that of their group/ classmates through a process of mutually conditioning relationships in teams (Tingstrom et al, 2006).

The co-occurrence of cooperative and individualised approaches in organising students' learning allows them to develop an active attitude towards their own goals that are also the common goals of the other members of the group which wins when all participants follow the rules, albeit with the right to err. During group work, the teacher is deprived of his/her decisive role in favour of partner cooperation and intragroup control (Kordziński, 2022). Individualism, on the other hand, is perceived here as focusing on the importance of the individual as a person who is, on the one hand, self-controlled and free from group dependencies, but, on the other hand, solely responsible for his/her successes or failures (Sztompka, 2002). We can also add that those successes and failures influence the success of the whole group. We may conclude that it is needed to create what Sztompka (2002, p. 566) calls a sense of subjective power, based on the conviction that all challenges and problems can be solved, whether alone or in a group, provided appropriate action is taken. This, in turn, is an important contribution to building adequate self-esteem, an important element of which is the belief in one's own agency. Beata Oelszlaeger (2007), who researches methods for teaching self-control and self-evaluation in early childhood education,

points out that they are important elements of pupils' subjective learning, which is a part of the canon of contemporary didactic approaches that grew out of the constructivism of Piaget and Inhelder (1993).

It is worth pointing out here that, in acquiring these competences, children also learn to identify the mistakes they make, to which each pupil/group is entitled (no more than 4 in number, because each successive failure/rule-breaking by an individual generates a negative point for the group). Making mistakes, according to Piaget and Inhelder (1993), is an inherent and necessary part of learning, embedded in the dynamics of its development and independent construction of knowledge. In addition, referring to the sociolinguistic theory of B. Bernstein (1975) by explaining the meaning of behaviours inscribed in specific rules, the teacher, by justifying their appropriateness/inappropriateness, contributes to the enrichment of the developed linguistic code, resulting in an easier mastery of the ability to use generalisations or non-specific, abstract concepts.

Explaining to children the reasons why they should or should not behave in a certain way, applying particular rules during the Game, and extrapolating them later also to behaviour outside the Game, contributes to the pupils' better adjustment to highly formalised school and later social demands. This is in line with Berstein's (2005) approach according to which children using a developed language code cope better with school demands, problems arising from role ambiguity or ambivalent perceptions, than children using a restricted code. The former are, therefore, more likely to avoid or exclude undesirable behaviour

# Summary and conclusions

An attentive view of the reality and a critical analysis of it allow us to see many changes taking place in its different areas. Often, we have limited influence over their emergence, but we also have the ability to search for tools and ways to respond adequately to them. This is due to the fact that we are equipped with personal, social or professional competences. However, given that, as J. Lamri (2021) points out, the competences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are oriented differently from those of the previous century, special emphasis should be placed on the development of those currently desired in both professional and personal development. In this context, the cited author mentions four essential competences: creativity, communication, critical thinking and cooperation, which allow one to adapt smoothly to new roles and tasks that result from them. The Good Behaviour Game programme fits perfectly into this competence expectation of the present and the future. It allows this potential to be developed in the child from the very beginning of the educational path and it often

makes it possible for children to use it to cope with individual difficulties or destructive environmental influences. The development of emotional and social competences is introduced in the course of the school curriculum, so it does not require additional time burdens on the pupil and the teacher, and the natural character of developmental activities makes it possible to fulfil the idea of "learning through objects rather than learning subjects" (Kelly, 2004, p. 201).

Possible doubts related to the programme's assumptions may refer to the collective (group) responsibility for the misconduct of even one group member, or the exertion of negative pressure, attitudes or peer interactions by the group towards students breaking the rules and contributing to the loss of the whole group. However, the results of the study (Grovesi Austin, 2019) revealed that GBG reduced disruptive behaviour, also in terms of negative interactions with peers, and it reinforced positive interactions, especially during the Game. Also, the social relevance results indicate that the majority of students felt that the interdependent group was fair in its judgements of the inappropriateness of particular actions. This can be linked to the positive role of self-reflective analyses, behaviours and events conducted with and by the children after the Game. It is also worth considering the assumption, which needs to be confirmed through research, that the control of resentments that sometimes arise among pupils is a consequence of their gaining an understanding of the importance of taking responsibility for their actions. Therefore, what is particularly important here is the teacher's role in guiding the students in internalizing the regularities that shape the quality of their interactions and in becoming aware of the consequences of their own actions.

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