



Jolanta Sajdera

orcid.org/0000-0002-7758-0117

e-mail: jolanta.sajdera@up.krakow.pl

University of the Commission of National Education in Cracow

Acquisition of Social Skills by Preschoolers in Task-related Situations

Nabywanie kompetencji społecznych przez
przedszkolaków w sytuacjach zadaniowych

KEYWORDS

acquisition of
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Anne-Nelly Perret-
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ABSTRACT

Childhood is a period of human life when interactions with peers become an opportunity to acquire social skills. The aim of this article is to contribute to analyses concerning social competence of preschool children in two dimensions: cognitive, by expanding knowledge of the theoretical basis for the acquisition of social competence; and tel-eological, by presenting educational situations that support the acquisition of social competence in childhood. In the first part, the concept of social competence was characterised, pointing out the definitional difficulties arising from different theoretical approaches in social sciences. Then, the profile of the Swiss researcher Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, who originated from the Geneva School, was presented, as well as the assumptions of the social-cognitive concept which is an example of the post-Piagetian trend in social research. The second part presents information from the analysis of three task-related situations being an example the arrangement of a social-cognitive conflict in the interactions of six-year-old kindergarten children. Three types of art-construction exercises that encourage children to share a tool, an idea and space are described. Attention was paid to the emergence of argumentative skills during interaction and the dilemmas of organising work in children's teams.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, interakcje rówieśnicze, nabywanie kompetencji społecznych, postpiagetowskie badania, wiek przedszkolny

Dzieciństwo jest okresem życia człowieka, w którym interakcje z rówieśnikami stają się okazją do nabywania umiejętności społecznych. W artykule dokonano analizy zagadnienia kompetencji społecznych dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym w dwóch wymiarach: poznawczym (poprzez poszerzenie wiedzy o teoretycznych podstawach nabywania kompetencji społecznych) oraz teleologicznym (poprzez prezentację sytuacji edukacyjnych wspierających nabywanie kompetencji społecznych w dzieciństwie). W pierwszej części scharakteryzowano pojęcie kompetencji społecznych, wskazując na trudności definicyjne wynikające z różnych podejść teoretycznych w naukach społecznych. Następnie zaprezentowano sylwetkę szwajcarskiej badaczki Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont wywodzącej się ze szkoły genewskiej i omówiono założenia koncepcji społeczno-poznawczej, która jest przykładem nurtu postpiagetowskiego w badaniach społecznych. W drugiej części przedstawiono komunikat z analizy trzech sytuacji zadaniowych stanowiących przykład aranżowania konfliktu społeczno-poznawczego podczas interakcji dzieci sześciolletnich w przedszkolu. Opisano trzy rodzaje zadań plastyczno-konstrukcyjnych zachęcających dzieci do dzielenia się narzędziem, pomysłem i przestrzenią. Zwrócono uwagę na wyłanianie się umiejętności argumentacyjnych w trakcie interakcji oraz dylematy związane z organizowaniem pracy w zespołach dziecięcych.

Introduction

Defining social competence needed to live in a community is the subject of many theoretical analyses. As Jean-Marie Barbier (2016, p. 99) notes, the conceptual construct of 'competence' is understood as both a process (the acquisition of competence) and a state (the recognition of having competence).

The issue of social competence revealed in childhood, taken up in this article, is derived from the definition introduced by Robert W. White in 1956 into the language of social sciences. Based on an analysis of children's interactions during Piagetian task trials (White, 1959, p. 113), the psychologist paid attention to the skills that help them cope better or worse in social relationships. Following White's definition, I understand competence as an organism's ability to interact effectively with the environment, resulting from a person's intrinsic need to cope with the environment and derive satisfaction from his/her own activity. In the following years, many researchers have extended the meaning and application of the concept to the broader context of human functioning in the environment and many approaches to their classification have been suggested. Human social competence is still the subject of much analysis. The introduction of the distinction between hard and soft competencies is an example

of ongoing reflection on the skills a person should have in order to function effectively in the environment.

I define the concept of social competence following H. Rudolf Schaffer who focuses on the broader context of this peculiar ‘collective term’, considering the most relevant manifestation of competence to be “effectiveness in interaction, assessed according to the child’s age, the culture in which he lives, his situation, and his goals” (Schaffer, 2010, p. 181).

Taking into account the existence of numerous studies on social competence as manifested by people (e.g. Argyle, 2002; Goleman, 2007; Matczak & Martowska, 2011; Deptuła & Misiuk 2016; Wróblewska, 2018), in what follows I will focus on the concept in relation to the effectiveness in interactions of preschool children. The choice of this age group is related to research findings indicating that middle childhood is the optimum period for fostering social competence due to the increasing need to interact with the non-family environment and the increasing understanding of other people’s beliefs.

In seeking a theoretical basis for investigating the meaning of preschool children’s interactions, I invoke the assumptions of the socio-cognitive concept of Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont¹, a researcher of the Geneva School. The author’s extensive scientific output is not translated into Polish with the exception of one of her early texts from 1979 in which she outlines the foundations of a concept developed in subsequent years. The overarching aim of the analyses undertaken in this article is to show the pedagogical implications of socio-cognitive concepts in explaining and supporting social competence during preschool children’s activities.

The Socio-Cognitive Concept of Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

The importance of social relationships for the process of constructing knowledge is one of the assumptions of the constructivist approach in contemporary education. The theoretical foundations of this current are primarily the theories of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. The theoretical studies of the continuators of the ideas of the classics of developmental psychology are presented in numerous publications, and, for many researchers, they are also the starting point for building their own theoretical concepts. A discussion on the incomplete understanding of the theoretical assumptions of constructivism in Polish pedagogy was carried out by Dorota Klus-Stańska

1 The text refers to publications available on the scientific portal: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anne-Nelly-Perret-Clermont> and in the catalogue of the Université de Neuchâtel: https://www.unine.ch/ipe/publications/anne_nelly_perret_clermont.

who even pointed out the deformations of this concept resulting from treating the stage nature of development as a kind of dogma (2019, p. 18). However, according to the author, the theory-forming power of the theories of the classics of constructivism, which contributed to the development of research conducted by subsequent generations of researchers, should not be forgotten.

In relation to the polemics concerning the validity of Piaget's theory and the post-Piagetian research trend, it is worthwhile, in my opinion, to recall the socio-cognitive concept of the Swiss researcher Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont. She studied psychology at the University of Geneva under the supervision of Jean Piaget from 1967 to 1971, and later she founded the Institute of Psychology and Education at the Swiss University of Neuchâtel where she still works. She deals with social and cultural psychology, with a particular focus on the study of child development and the importance of education, and she combines the classical scientific tradition showing the complementarity of Piaget's and Vygotsky's research. Her path to research independence alongside the strong, charismatic personality of the 'patron' that Jean Piaget was for his colleagues, is interesting. Perret-Clermont states that she detached herself from the great psychologist in order to "cross certain borders of Piaget's theory in order to emphasise how thought is rooted in the social interactions that give rise to it" (Perret-Clermont, 2023, p. 1).

Perret-Clermont pointed out that classical Piagetian tasks (which explore the understanding of the principle of constancy) do not exhaust knowledge about the importance of the role of social relationships for cognitive development, as they focus on the child's interactions with the world of objects. Together with Willem Doise and Gabriel Mugny, she worked on her own interpretations of child development theory by analysing the course of Piagetian tasks solved in child dyads and triads (Doise et al., 1975). The author's basic hypothesis, formulated in 1976, which accompanied her further research work, was: "one important aspect of social interaction is the occasion for socio-cognitive conflicts" (Perret-Clermont, 1979, p. 64).

In redefining the phenomenon of socio-cognitive conflict in 2022, Perret-Clermont highlighted the following features:

- Cognitive conflict is experienced by two people 'here and now' during a dynamic process that occurs when different (initially incompatible) points of view have to be coordinated in order to find a solution acceptable to the interaction partners;
- The coordination of different points of view most often takes the form of glances, gestures, joint actions, verbal exchanges or arguments;
- Resolving socio-cognitive conflict requires joint attention focused on a common object, as well as mutual respect and a 'thinking space' which is safe enough (emotionally, institutionally and culturally) for the interaction partners to dare to put

forward alternative solutions while maintaining their own independence (Perret-Clermont, 2022).

The author has conducted a number of research attempts on the phenomenon of peer tutoring as a symmetrical relationship in which the roles of novice and expert are dependent on the competences possessed rather than on the age or social role of the partners (Tartas & Perret-Clermont, 2008). The authors' most recent research focuses on the development of argumentation theory in relation to the capabilities of preschool and early elementary school children. Perret-Clermont notes that researchers' focus on mature arguments used by adults in formal situations (e.g. politics, academia) does not exhaust knowledge of the arduous process of children's use of proto-argumentation. Together with interdisciplinary teams, she conducts research in which she demonstrates that children's argumentative capacities do not differ from those of adults (e.g. Perret-Clermont et al., 2019).

Practical Implications of Socio-Cognitive Concepts in Teachers' Work

Perret-Clermont repeatedly addresses the aspect of applying research findings to educational contexts in her publications. She emphasises that argumentative skills can develop during preschool play and school activities when adults provide children with sufficient 'space for dialogue' (Greco & Perret-Clermont 2023, p. 468). This metaphor is understood in the sense of both the material and emotional conditions created by teachers, who should, according to the authors, be "guardians of safe spaces for thinking and social interaction" (p. 468). They also call for more attention to be paid to the way in which conditions for dialogue and argumentation are (not) provided for children in adult-designed environments, citing the organisation of children's visits to museums as an example.

Perret-Clermont stresses that too much focus by teachers on the expected level of development of social skills justified by age or stage of education is indicative of treating children as 'imperfect' participants in social interaction. The author encourages the systematic creation of situations that allow children of preschool or early school age to gradually take into account a point of view that is different from their own. She also notes that, in a situation of interaction with an authority adult, children primarily make an effort to guess the correct answer that they assume the adult expects (Perret-Clermont et al., 2014, p. 259). This phenomenon is also described by other researchers who reinterpret the results of Piagetian tasks. For example, Schaffer (2005, p. 208) cites the research of McGarrigle and Donaldson who used a 'naughty bear' mascot as an interaction partner with the child. The authors' idea was applied in the work of

Edyta Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska who repeatedly refers to Piaget's theory in her concept of 'child mathematics' (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska & Zielińska, 1997, p. 60). On the other hand, child discourse researcher – Grace W. Shugar (1995, p. 140) referred to Perret-Clermont's early research, indicating the need for deeper descriptions of coordination strategies in children's dyads. Shugar's notions of bargaining (1982, p. 9), opposing, peer disputes, contentious situations, and oppositional episodes (1995, p. 139) can be applied to features of socio-cognitive conflict. Perret-Clermont's research also inspires Polish researchers of peer tutoring who see its potential in inclusive education (Twardowski, 2014, p. 37). Ewa Rzechowska (2004), who researched interactions in children's triads, also cited the assumptions of Perret-Clermont's social-cognitive concept as a theoretical foundation for creating original educational situations (p. 122).

Creating Conditions for the Acquisition of Social Competence of Preschoolers in Task-Based Situations. Analysis of the Author's Own Research

Initiated by post-Piagetian scholars, studies of the course of children's interactions are conducted in a variety of interpretive contexts, and their participants are more often schoolchildren than preschool children. The aim of this part of the article is to show suggestions for creating conditions for dialogue and argumentation in task situations for preschoolers. The methodological inspiration for constructing the research sample was the strategies of oppositional discourse in the interactions of 3–5-year-old children described by Shugar (1995), as well as the research of Monika Wiśniewska-Kin (2019), which involved pupils watched during their stay in the school day care centre.

The presented analyses of the research samples are based on empirical material collected in kindergartens during placements conducted by students of preschool and early school pedagogy at the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków. While preparing the task situations, an answer was sought to the question of the course of children's interactions involving sharing with others. It was recognised that sharing is one of the pro-social behaviours that cause difficulties for preschool children in the developmental phase of childhood egocentrism.

The tasks were part of the traditional activities organised by the students in the kindergarten, and, therefore, took place in a situation familiar to the children. The conflict (difficulty, contentious situation) involved both a context and a partner. The context was the three suggestions for art and technology activities which created the conditions for experiencing difficulties (socio-cognitive conflict) in the situation of sharing art accessories (making a collage), ideas (how to connect lines to

make a common product) and space (how to place objects in space to make a common product). The second type of difficulty was the changing number of participants in the task trials, which required taking into account the different points of view of different people. The number of participants offered a task depended on the technique chosen, and so the children worked first in teams of six (collage technique), who then formed triads (line painting) and then matched up in pairs (constructing). Thus, each child participated three times in the interaction, having the opportunity to be active in teams of six, three and in pairs. The object of the research trials was the interactions of eighteen six-year-old children during the tasks. The student-watchers recorded the course of the interaction in their protocols, paying attention to verbal acts during the sharing of material, ideas and space.

The analysis of the empirical material presented here focuses on the description of children's activities during sharing, taking into account the forms of information exchange and the ways in which a given task is carried out. In interpreting the cited examples of children's statements in oppositional situations, reference was made to the analytical categories used by Shugar (1995, p. 149) and Wiśniewska-Kin (2019, p. 37).

Table 1. Forms of Verbal Messages of 6-Year-Old Children During Task Trials

Number of participants in the task situation	Monologues L	Dialogues L
3 teams of six	14	9
6 triads	6	10
9 pairs	13	10

Source: the authors' own research.

As Table 1 shows, in each type of task situation, the forms of information exchange were both monologues and dialogues. Monologuing during the performance of the work was used by the children to announce their idea, and sometimes it was the initial stage of initiating a contentious situation arising in the line of action. The cited examples of speech refer to recorded situations of disagreement.

The task suggested to the teams of six (collage) was done by all children individually and the interactions were parallel. Dialogues occurred in situations of asking to borrow a certain material (e.g. glue) or commenting on the work being done by a colleague. Only in one team was a contentious situation noticed:

Peer interaction I

Participants: four children; two do not join the conversation.

Pre-opposition event: six children are creating their own collage artwork using yarn, tissue paper and leaves. Four children are trying to work out who will use the glue.

(M): Can I have some glue, Linda?

(L): I want glue, too!

(J): Hey, Linda, that's my glue!

(A): I also want glue.

(L): (*Throws glue on the table.*) All right.

(M): (*Takes over the glue.*)

The category of the oppositional state: demand for exclusive control over the object of the action.

The contentious situation initiated by the author of the contentious movement (M) is met with an argument expressed by the author of the opposing movement (L). This encourages co-participants (J) and (A) to repeat the demand of the author of the disputing movement (M). Influenced by the demand for exclusive control over the object, the child (L) changes her line of action, giving up her own need.

The task suggested to teams of three (painting three lines) gave each participant the opportunity to combine their own lines of action in interaction. In the two triads, contentious situations arose prompting dialogue as the children tried to determine how the creation was made by negotiating the choice of colours:

Peer interaction II

Participants: two children; the third one does not join the conversation

Pre-opposition event: the children are sitting around a sheet of paper with three brushes and three colours of paint. Child (D) is working in silence, painting lines in the corner of the sheet; two children (K) and (M) are negotiating the choice of colours and joining their lines on the sheet, but omitting the lines already painted by the friend. The child (K), looking at the completed work, says:

(K): Great! (*After a while.*) I want yellow!

(M): And me, blue! (*He is painting.*)

(K): (*Looks at the work again.*) Cool!

(M): I will make a similar one to you.

(K): Cool!

The category of the oppositional state: interference with the line of action.

The interaction is partly parallel: one of the children (D) is working individually and does not join the line of action nor is he encouraged to do so. The situation initiated by the child (K) is an example of a monologue turning into a dialogue. The utterance of the author of the contentious movement (K): “I want yellow” does not provoke resistance from the co-participant (M), but rather encourages the continuation of the line of action.

It is different in the next example of working in a triad:

Peer interaction III

Participants: two children; the third one does not join in.

Pre-opposition event: the children are sitting around a sheet of paper with three brushes and three colours of paint. Child (J), having chosen a paint colour, is working silently, continuing the lines painted by her colleague (L) and keeping them similar. Children (M) and (L) are negotiating the choice of colours and the appearance of the creation. Child (M), looking at the completed work, says:

(M): It will be like this! (*He is drawing a line and putting down his brush.*) I need red!

(L): I want the red one, too.

(M): No, because I want it!

(L): OK, I'll take the blue one. (*A moment of silence.*)

(M): No, I don't want you to paint it like that for me!

The category of the oppositional state: reservations about how to participate in a common line of action.

The contentious situation initiated by the author of the contentious movement (M) triggers the reaction of the author of the opposing movement (L), who, under the demand for exclusive control over the object, changes his line of action, giving up his own need. At the same time, (L) continues to complete the task with the other co-participant (J). When (L) is trying to rejoin (M)'s line of action, he is met with his verbal resistance and withdraws to cooperate with (J).

The interaction described took place in the silent presence of the child (J) who did not take part in the negotiation, continuing to work with (L). The result of the children's behaviour in this triad was a very large individual drawing made by (M) below which were compositions made jointly by the other participants in the triad.

The task suggested to the pairs of children was to construct a spaceship from cardboard boxes. With eight pairs, the dialogues undertaken were calm; the children shared ideas; and the topics of conversation focused on the next stages of the task, for example:

Peer interaction IV

Participants: two children

Pre-opposition event: children are looking at paper rolls and cardboard boxes; and they negotiate how to make a rocket.

(A): Give me the card and the roll.

(B): (*Gives.*) How shall we do it?

(A): We'll stick it to the card.

(B): Cool. (*A moment of silence; watching.*)

(A): It doesn't look like a rocket.

(B): Why not?

(A): Let's make the top and it will be a nice rocket.

(B): Good!

The category of the oppositional state: interference with the line of action.

The interaction consists of informing each other about the next steps of the task. Both (A) and (B) direct their expectations to their partner and share ideas. The contentious situation initiated by the author of the contentious movement (A): "it doesn't look like a rocket" does not trigger a countermovement, but rather curiosity of (B) about the suggestion to change the line of action.

Only in one of the pairs did the interaction take place almost all the time in parallel; the partners failed to cooperate:

Peer interaction V

Participants: two children

Pre-opposition event: the children are looking at paper rolls and cardboard boxes; one child (B) starts to do the construction, while the other (A) is watching and trying to establish a dialogue:

(A): Are we doing this together?

(B): (*Keeps silent and keeps doing the work.*)

(A): Are you doing it yourself?

(B): (*Doesn't answer. After a while, he says:*) It's going to be great!

(A): (*Silent, watching*).

(B): How do you glue it together? Oh, cool!

The category of the oppositional state: disturbed line of action.

Despite the lack of verbal signs of a contentious situation, it can be seen that (A) is puzzled by the lack of response from (B). She tries twice to cooperate and then gives up, remaining a passive observer. It should be added that in this interaction the participant (B) was the same child who did not cooperate in the triad when painting the lines (peer interaction III).

Conclusions

The examples of task situations presented offer three different ways of encouraging children to interact. It is worth recalling that the aim of the analyses was not to determine which form is better or worse, but to show the possibilities of encouraging children to use argumentation during the activities suggested in kindergartens. Spontaneous play is of course a natural space for the acquisition of social competences, but children select themselves into playgroups according to their own preferences, often leaving out some of their peers. Thus, the chances of experiencing socio-cognitive conflict are for children who are liked and who already have some social competence. The presented suggestion for task rehearsals offers the opportunity to foster competence in three types of interaction: in teams of six, triads and dyads. Using the example of one of the participants in interactions III and V, it can be seen that seemingly effective participation in a six-person team does not guarantee the possession of cooperative competence requiring argumentation in contentious situations. Using the example of the triad interactions described, it can be concluded that these were the most difficult for the preschoolers, as they required agreeing on roles and coordinating as many as two different points of view. The monologuing that occurred during the described task trials can be seen as attempts by the child to initiate a conversation, whereas in the dialogues, attempts to establish a relationship based on effective argumentation through goal orientation and work sharing could be noticed. The results also confirm the developmental difficulties in conversations of six-year-old children who are already able to maintain the principles of interpersonal rhetoric when establishing and sustaining interactions, but have difficulties in applying elaborate rhetorical rules (Kielar-Turska, 1989, p. 27). In the described interactions, children experiencing a dispute tended to

give way to their partner or to remain silent and did not take up the defence of their reasons in any other way than through expressive utterances.

The situations presented are suggestions for preschool teachers who are looking for ways to organise 'thinking space' during various forms of child interaction. Publications on preschool children's social activity focus on diagnostic attempts to determine the state of competence. As Schaffer (2006, p. 16) points out, the contemporary image of the socially competent child cannot be derived solely from adult expectations of behaviour. Pointing to the person of a child who is popular in the peer group as the 'ideal type' for the acquisition of social competence is not authoritative, because it does not take into account cultural diversity in the course of human relationships. Depending on the context, a child's disobedience may also be a reflection of the social competence he or she possesses (Schaffer, 2006, p. 281).

The theoretical concepts presented in this article are selected examples of how classical theories of child development can be reinterpreted. Diagnosing social competence should not be a substitute for systematically supporting children in gathering social information, trying to understand the reasons for other people's behaviour and being ready to solve social problems.

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