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Social-Emotional Functioning of Children at Risk of Dyslexia and Preventive Activities of Kindergartens and Schools

Funkcjonowanie społeczno-emocjonalne dzieci z grupy ryzyka dysleksji a działania profilaktyczne przedszkola i szkoły

KEYWORDS

children at risk of specific learning difficulties, social-emotional competencies, preventive programs, educational programs, stimulation

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to present the importance of the functioning of children at risk of specific learning difficulties in the social-emotional area and related preventive activities undertaken in kindergartens/schools. The first part of the article discusses the difficulties in the social-emotional area that a child at risk of specific learning difficulties may face already at the level of kindergarten or lower school grades, i.e. a low level of social competencies, internalising behaviours, lower adaptive skills, and withdrawal. Then, the author of the article discusses tasks and roles of the kindergarten and school in improving key competencies in the social-emotional aspect of children's lives, and the possibilities of supporting the children's proper development in this area at preschool and early school age, with particular emphasis on children at risk of dyslexia. This is important because in schools, interventions to improve social-emotional competences are hardly ever undertaken, and the activities of the teaching staff focus mainly on equipping children with the basic knowledge necessary to learn

reading and writing. The lack of appropriate training in emotional and social competences causes and deepens difficulties and disorders in reactions in various social situations. That is why, there is a need to take into account appropriate interactions in the educational process.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

dzieci z grupy
ryzyka
specyficznych
trudności w uczeniu
się, kompetencje
społeczno-
emocjonalne,
programy
profilaktyczne,
programy
wychowawcze,
stymulacja

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia specyfiki funkcjonowania społeczno-emocjonalnego dzieci z grupy ryzyka specyficznych trudności w uczeniu się. Ponadto w doniesieniu przedstawione zostaną działania profilaktyczne w tym zakresie, podejmowane w przedszkolach oraz szkołach. W pierwszej części artykułu omówiono trudności w obszarze społeczno-emocjonalnym, z jakimi dziecko z grupy ryzyka specyficznych trudności w uczeniu się może się borykać już na poziomie przedszkola lub młodszych klas szkolnych, tj. z niskim poziomem kompetencji społecznych, zachowaniami internalizacyjnymi, mniejszymi umiejętnościami adaptacyjnymi, wycofaniem. Następnie omówiono zadania i rolę przedszkola i szkoły w podnoszeniu kompetencji kluczowych w zakresie sfery społeczno-emocjonalnej dzieci oraz możliwości wspierania prawidłowego rozwoju w tym obszarze dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnym szkolnym ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem dzieci z grupy ryzyka dysleksji. Jest to o tyle ważne, że w szkołach interwencje podnoszące kompetencje społeczno-emocjonalne podejmowane są sporadycznie, a działania kadry pedagogicznej koncentrują się głównie na wyposażeniu dzieci w podstawową wiedzę niezbędną do nauczania się czytania i pisania. Brak odpowiedniego treningu kompetencji emocjonalno-społecznych powoduje i pogłębia trudności i zaburzenia w reakcjach w różnych sytuacjach społecznych, stąd konieczność uwzględniania odpowiednich oddziaływań w procesie edukacyjno-wychowawczym.

Introduction

Dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by learning difficulties. Currently, the global population of people with dyslexia ranges from 5 to 17%. Determining the global count worldwide is quite difficult due to changing diagnostic criteria, varying testing tools from country to country, as well as demographic and socio-emotional factors (Silani et al., 2005).

Problems and school difficulties of students at risk of dyslexia are not limited to aspects of learning, i.e. those related to reading and writing (primary causes). A review of research on specific areas of preschool and school functioning of children at risk of dyslexia indicates that these children have difficulties in the acquisition and

development of social competence (secondary cause of dyslexia).¹ The co-occurrence of low social competence, disorders in the emotional sphere (also a secondary cause of dyslexia), as well as lowered levels of self-esteem was pointed out in the International Classification of Diseases and Health Problems (ICD-11). It was emphasized that all dysfunctions in the social and emotional spheres appear most often in the early years of schooling, to take the form of disorders in adolescence (ICD-11, 2022).

A child who experiences failure in various areas of life from an early age functions under pressure. Expectations from parents, teachers and peers result in that he/she may begin to withdraw from relationships and give up his/her interests just to get better marks at school to please parents and teachers. Therefore, the development of appropriate preventive and educational programs, organizing training in social-emotional skills should be a priority in kindergartens and schools, as the child will not be motivated to learn if he/she does not have positive relationships with others.

The purpose of this article is to draw the readers' attention to one of the most important problems in the education of children at risk of dyslexia, i.e. the level of their social competence. Research on this subject in this age group is rarely carried out due to the problems with selecting appropriate research groups and tools. Research studies indicate that children from the at-risk group are characterised by lower levels of competencies that are necessary for the fulfilment of social roles. From a review of various prevention and parenting programs, it is clear that this issue is addressed sporadically, and parents often lack guidance from teachers on how to deal with their children.

Social-Emotional Competence in Children at Risk of Dyslexia

The development of social skills and social relations is important insofar as it is indicative of psychosocial development, and helps one adapt to school requirements. In order for a student in the future not to have difficulties in establishing and maintaining contacts with peers, he/she needs the skills necessary to cope with social problem situations, a high level of pro-social behavior, as well as communication skills. According to Anna Matczak (Matczak & Martowska, 2009), social-emotional competencies are complex skills which determine the effectiveness of emotional regulation and coping in various social situations. This is made possible by equipping the

1 Social competence is a multi-layered concept. According to Anna Matczak (2012), they are "complex skills that determine the effectiveness of coping with certain types of social situations, acquired by an individual in the course of social training" (p. 7). They include interpersonal competencies, i.e. social skills used to maintain relationships with others, and intrapersonal competencies, i. e. such abilities through which a person learns himself or herself.

person with: 1) skills related to social perception (accurately perceiving others, such as their experiences or intentions, as well as understanding and correctly assessing social situations); 2) social sensitivity, empathy and interpersonal decentration; 3) knowledge of social rules and the ability to behave appropriately in social situations; 4) the ability to solve specific interpersonal problems and control social situations; 5) skills that determine how to deal with conflict situations and those requiring assertiveness; 6) effective self-presentation and the ability to influence others; 7) communication skills, and 8) cooperative skills.

The development of social competence in children at risk of dyslexia at preschool and younger school ages is relatively rarely the subject of research. Analyses of this area are carried out mainly among adolescents with a diagnosis of specific difficulties. Interpreting the collected empirical material, it is worth noting that the education system in different European countries differs, different diagnostic criteria are used (despite the common basis, i.e. ICD-11), different research tools are used, and completely different systems of support and specialised therapy are provided.

One of the few longitudinal studies that has been conducted on the social competencies possessed by children at risk for specific learning disabilities was developed by Paulina Parhiala and her team (2015). Its purpose was to determine the level of functioning of preschool and younger school-aged children (aged 4 to 9) in terms of four spheres of psychosocial functioning. These were: adaptation and social skills, level of focusing attention, ability to externalize emotions, and internalizing behaviour.

It turned out that children aged 4 and 6 have lower adaptation and social skills, and lower levels of focusing attention than children without dyslexia risk difficulties, while these skills improve with age. The authors are of the opinion that since difficulties in these two areas appear as early as at preschool age, they should not be regarded as secondary reactions occurring at the beginning of education as an effect of the difficulty of acquiring knowledge. This data is in line with the results of other empirical studies indicating the absence of adaptation and social difficulties of children who already attend school at the age of 9 (cf. e.g. Sorensen et al., 2003; Snowling et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2008; Kempe et al., 2011; Balboni et al., 2017; Helton et al., 2018). It was also noted that boys at risk of dyslexia were characterised by a greater positive change in adaptability, which may most likely be due to the compensatory mechanisms applied.

According to Sima Zach, Orla Yazdi-Ugav and Aviva Zeev (2016), children at risk of dyslexia are characterised by lower social competence and behavioural difficulties. The most likely explanation is that at-risk students spend a longer time in younger grades to acquire reading competencies and master basic spelling rules compared to their peers. They spend more time reading and have less of it for their peers. Most of their personal, emotional and cognitive resources are directed toward meeting the

demands of the teacher. Therefore, social skills, i.e. the ability to cope with difficult situations, with negative information about oneself, the ability to solve conflicts, or the ability to listen to the interlocutor, are often underdeveloped. Similar conclusions were reached by Turija Aro et al. (2012).

To help young children at risk of developing dyslexia, i.e. in middle and late childhood, it is very important to give them autonomy, support them and develop their hobbies and interests. This approach can reduce anxiety in them, and it may help them process the content of tasks to be completed at their own pace. The time they are given allows them to build the “scaffolding” necessary to master basic skills, both at school and those related to understanding emotions and establishing relationships. If these children are not allowed to be independent, they will not know what responsibility is. The cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies used in the learning process will be inefficient and ineffective, which, in turn, will translate into lower quality interpersonal relationships in the older grades. Lack of autonomy also means dependence on others. Waiting for help with the simplest tasks. And always relying on others leads to lowering of one’s own self-esteem and an unwillingness to be active (Lilian et al., 2015).

Interesting data on the co-occurrence of the relationship between specific learning difficulties and social competence, including pro-social behavior in preschool and younger school-aged children, was provided by the research of Ian Dempsey and Megan Valentine (2017). They proved that it is children at risk of dyslexia who have higher levels of pro-social behaviour compared to children who do not have such difficulties. These results are in contradiction to those presented by most researchers on this issue. Emotions in human life are of great importance for the acquisition of social competence. They help one to adapt to changing conditions, motivate to further actions, influence the activity undertaken, and encourage (or not) to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. Meeting the demands of school and parents forces students to master many competencies. Some of the most important of them include the ability to read and understand their own emotions as well as those of others, which influences the ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. Good emotions occurring in different situations can improve learning efficiency, as well as stimulate action and increased effort. Research analyses show (e.g. Huang et al., 2020) that children with a diagnosis of risk of specific learning difficulties may be characterised by neuroticism, a tendency to introversion, shyness; they may develop psychosomatic disorders, irritability and a tendency to a lower mood. According to the above-mentioned researchers, children at risk of dyslexia may be more likely than their peers to have lower levels of self-esteem, which negatively affects motivation to learn due to frustration, but also reduces the desire to establish and develop interpersonal relationships.

In summary, children and students with specific learning difficulties experience many difficult situations in interpersonal relationships and in analysing emotions. In order to understand the behaviour of others and the emotions that accompany them, they spend a lot of time on this, which can interfere with efficient functioning. Therefore, the development of effective intervention programs (Bhan & Farooqui, 2013) focusing on increasing knowledge of social life, rules of group coexistence, conflict resolution, and identification of emotions in social situations, should be one of the primary tasks of educational therapists.

Kindergarten and School Actions Aimed at Increasing Social and Emotional Competencies of Children With Specific Learning Difficulties

Students with dyslexia are often identified as children with difficulties in mastering basic school abilities, i.e. reading and/or writing. Therefore, the majority of therapeutic programs implemented in school are limited to reading and writing, with little emphasis on aspects of social and emotional difficulties (cf. Rafał-Łuniewska, 2021).

Taking into account the emotional and social challenges analysed and described, as well as their interrelationship with other areas of psychosocial functioning of children at risk of dyslexia, appropriate therapeutic measures are necessary to ensure that each child is able to fully achieve all the competencies and requirements of particular educational stages.

The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 14, 2017 on the core curriculum for kindergarten education and the core curriculum for general education for primary school, including for students with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, general education for vocational school of the first degree, general education for a special vocational school, and general education for a post-secondary school, clearly emphasizes the tasks of kindergarten and elementary school which are important from the point of view of the considerations carried out in this article. Such tasks include:

- supporting the multidirectional activity of the child by organising conditions for the acquisition of experiences also in the emotional and social area of development,
- ensuring the proper organisation of conditions for the children to acquire experiences that allow them to continue the processes of adaptation, and help those children who are developing in a non-harmonious, slower or accelerated manner,

- strengthening the sense of values, the need to form personal relationships and participate in a group, and preparing children to understand emotions and feelings (their own and those of other people),
- creation of situations leading to the child's learning of values and social norms derived from the family, peer group and adults, as well as the development of behaviour resulting from values that can be understood at particular stages of development (Rozporządzenie..., 2017, pp. 3–19).

Thus, each child completing preschool education should be able to recognize and name basic emotions and try to cope with them in a way that allows him/her to adapt in a new environment, as well as respect his/her own emotions and those of others. A manifestation of emotional maturity should be the ability to control emotions, and, in difficult situations, to seek appropriate support from people in the immediate environment, as well as to establish proper peer relations and communicate with children and adults, which should be based on respect, kindness, friendship, as well as respect for the norms and rules prevailing in the environment (Rozporządzenie..., 2017, pp. 4–5).

In turn, the early childhood education stage should allow each student to develop the need to form proper relationships while being aware of the emotions experienced and the ability to control them and express them in a way that enables interaction and adaptation in a group. This stage of education should also make it possible to master the ability to feel emotional connection and the need to build it, as well as to become aware of the feelings experienced by others with an attempt to understand why they occur, as well as to differentiate the forms of their expression according to one's age. A third-grader should have the need for social activity based on the values of the environment; he/she should evaluate his/her and others' behaviour referring to accepted principles and values. At this stage it is also important to master the ability to form relationships, cooperate and independently organize group work, express one's expectations and social needs while respecting peers and adults through simple forms of expression and appropriate behaviour (Rozporządzenie..., 2017, pp. 33–34).

These are factors and abilities necessary for the fulfilment of the guidelines specified in the European Union Council Recommendations for key competencies in life-long learning (Zalecenie..., 2018).

The Council's guidelines clearly emphasize that the role of education systems, and – more precisely – the role of teachers, is to develop students' key competencies, understood as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that go beyond the concept of focusing on knowledge alone, so that, as adults, they can function properly in the surrounding and constantly changing reality (Furgoł, n.d.).

One of the eight areas of key competencies is personal, social and learning skills, seen as the ability to self-reflect, manage time and information effectively, work constructively with others, remain resilient, and manage one's own learning and career.

The recommendations also show how essential (for maintaining successful interpersonal relationships and participation in social life) it is to develop an understanding of the rules of conduct and communication generally accepted in different societies and environments.

These skills include the ability to determine one's capabilities, think critically and make decisions, which is related to the proper development of the ability to learn and work in a group and individually, as well as to organize one's learning, persevere in learning, evaluate and share one's knowledge, while seeking support if needed, and effectively managing social interactions. It is, therefore, necessary to be able to communicate constructively in different environments, to work in teams and negotiate in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance, understanding of different points of view, empathy combined with mental toughness, assertiveness, and the ability to deal with uncertainty and stress (European Commission, 2019).

In order to properly develop and effectively implement a preventive-educational program in both kindergarten and at school, it is necessary, first of all, to carry out an appropriate diagnostic procedure to capture and take into account the actual developmental needs and challenges of children. It is also necessary to have the knowledge and adequate competence of the staff of the institutions regarding the functioning and difficulties of students who develop normally and students with special developmental, educational and educational needs.

In the area of diagnosis of emotional-social competence, special attention should be paid not only to internal factors affecting the children's achievement of the necessary skills in this area, but also to the role of the family, the atmosphere at home and the parenting style, the influence of the media, the peer group, previous therapeutic interactions, and the system of work of the educational staff. Thus, an educational institution, when planning educational-preventive activities, must have information about its students perceived from the perspective of their school, family and personal problems (Borowik, 2018).

It should be borne in mind that the prevention and education programs implemented in kindergartens and schools are universal in nature, holistically approaching students as a social group. Only specific group or class programs allow for more precise tailoring of individual interventions.

Therefore, a very important aspect of a teacher's work is the development and implementation of such interactions that will meet the individual emotional and social needs of the students in a particular class.

Given the analysed difficulties of students at risk of dyslexia, teachers should have the knowledge, competence and skills to effectively develop appropriate lesson plans to implement appropriate procedures and interactions on the basis of available therapeutic tools:

- social skills training – in particular exercises that take into account the skills of attentive listening in communicating with others and relationships with peers, resolving conflicts in a group, cooperation during various forms of work in class, stress management, positive attitude, as well as time management or goal setting;
- aggression replacement training – with a focus on talking about feelings, as well as implementing appropriate techniques to change aggressive reactions, such as: “stop-breath-reflection”, “replace aggression with physical activity”, or “find an alternative solution”;
- multimedia program “The Power of Emotions” – an interactive form of exercises and games related to integration in a group, understanding one’s own emotions and the emotions of others, acceptance of oneself and others, and the formation of the competencies necessary to communicate with others in an appropriate manner; this programme makes it possible for students to reinforce good behaviour in an attractive form;
- educational package “Know and Understand Feelings” – a friendly form of exercises in the form of picture stories, stories with exercises, social stories, or a guide adapted to the students’ level of understanding will enable students at risk of dyslexia, but also their peers, to understand each other’s feelings, and it will teach them empathy;
- a program of classes developing emotional and social competencies prepared by Zyta Czechowska will help students develop basic pro-social skills, such as body posture, voice, eye contact, facial expressions in social contact, as well as appropriate communication, discussion and questioning, the ability to win, lose and compromise, and how to respond to and solve difficult situations at school, at home and in other places (Goldstein et al., 2004; Glick & Gibbs, 2011; Larson & Lochman, 2013; Fornalik et al., 2018; Baker, 2022; Góra et al., 2022; Czechowska, 2022).

Summary and Conclusions

An analysis of the publicly available content of both school and classroom prevention and education programs allows us to conclude that the interactions contained in them are not designed to address all the difficulties and challenges of students from each group of special educational needs. They are often too general and repeatedly duplicated.

Therefore, according to the authors, there is a need to develop more detailed guidelines that take into account the adaptation of programs and the forms, methods and means of interaction contained in them to the specific needs of students with particular difficulties and disabilities, including those at risk of dyslexia.

It is true that in the educational and therapeutic offer, within the framework of psychological and pedagogical assistance (also as a form of pedagogical innovation), there are programs to support emotional and social development (concerning, for example, emotional intelligence, dealing with difficult emotions, stress and aggression, developing empathy or building healthy peer relationships). They often refer to students as a whole class or school community, but much more often they are aimed only at students receiving psychological and pedagogical assistance as a whole (with a different spectrum of difficulties) or as a suggestion for support in which children enrolled by their parents can participate.

Thus, in therapeutic and educational work, the use of programs that develop emotional and social competencies as well as other available therapeutic programs and aids, can be extremely helpful in reducing the difficulties of children at risk of dyslexia – such programmes can be an indispensable support that makes it possible for such children to develop skills of communication, coping with stress, conflict resolution and building positive relationships with others. All this, in turn, will influence the holistic development of children and positively affect their learning and interpersonal relationships.

However, there are some limitations, as, due to the cost and lack of widespread availability of such programmes in institutions, not every teacher has the opportunity to use them. Also, due to the lack of expanded knowledge of teachers, as well as limitations in applicability and individualization of therapeutic work, some programs may prove too general and fail to take into account the emotional and social diversity of participants, or contain content that is not adapted to the specific situations of participants.

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