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“For Me and for You, My Student”. The Relationship Between Teachers’ Mentalizing and Functioning in Their Professional Role and the Students’ Development

„Dla siebie i dla ciebie, uczniu” – o związkach mentalizowania nauczycieli z ich funkcjonowaniem w roli zawodowej i z rozwojem uczniów

KEYWORDS

mentalizing, teaching, well-being, professional burnout, classroom atmosphere, student development

ABSTRACT

The teaching profession is one of those in which interaction with another person, communication, commitment, and emotional exchange, play an important role. In this context, mentalizing perceived as the ability to understand one’s own and other people’s mental states as causes of behaviour (Białocka-Pikul, 2012), seems to be one of the foundations of creating satisfying relationships with others, including the teacher-student relationship. The purpose of this article is to present the existing research on mentalizing abilities of teachers. A review of the literature on the subject suggests the need to identify at least two groups of research in this area. First, the research focuses on the meaning of mentalizing for teachers’ functioning in their professional role; and second, it shows the relationship between teachers’ mentalizing and the functioning of their students. The review indicates that mentalizing can be a protective factor for teachers’ functioning and a facilitator of classroom relationships and student

development. However, conclusions should be made with caution, as research on this issue has been conducted for a short time, and the collected data needs to be deepened and replicated in further studies.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

mentalizacja,
nauczanie,
dobrostan,
wypalenie
zawodowe, klimat
klasy, rozwój
uczniów

W zawodzie nauczyciela kontakt z drugą osobą, procesy komunikowania, zaangażowania i wymiany emocjonalnej odgrywają istotną rolę. W tym kontekście mentalizowanie rozumiane jako zdolność wyrażająca się w kompetencji do ujmowania stanów mentalnych własnych i drugiej osoby jako przyczyn zachowania (Białecka-Pikul, 2012) wydaje się stanowić jeden z filarów budowania satysfakcjonujących relacji z innymi, także relacji nauczyciel–uczeń. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie dostępnych badań dotyczących zdolności do mentalizacji u nauczycieli. Przegląd literatury sugeruje konieczność wyodrębnienia co najmniej dwóch grup badań w tym obszarze. Po pierwsze badania koncentrują się wokół znaczenia mentalizacji dla funkcjonowania nauczycieli w roli zawodowej, a po drugie pokazują związki mentalizacji nauczycieli z funkcjonowaniem ich uczniów. Dokonany przegląd wskazuje, że mentalizacja może stanowić czynnik ochronny dla funkcjonowania nauczycieli oraz czynnik facylitujący relacje w klasie i rozwój uczniów. Jednak wnioski powinny być formułowane z ostrożnością, bowiem badania nad tą problematyką prowadzone są od niedawna i zgromadzone dane wymagają pogłębienia i replikacji.

Introduction

Mentalizing and theory of mind are constructs used to describe people's ability to perceive and interpret their own and others' behaviour in relation to mental states such as intentions, thoughts and beliefs, as well as desires and feelings (Białecka-Pikul, 2012; Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Frith & Frith, 2003; Premack & Woodruff, 1978). The analysis of the semantic field of these terms, as well as related ones, has been done in books (Białecka-Pikul, 2009, 2012; Luyten & Fonagy, 2015; Whiten, 1994). These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, although some researchers note that their field of meaning cannot be considered fully overlapping (e.g. Sharp & Venta, 2012). While analysing the research in this area, it can be noted that mentalizing is a construct that is usually used in a medical context, whereas the term "theory of mind" is more often used in developmental research (cf. Valle et al., 2016). With regard to teaching, researchers use the term "theory of mind", for example when addressing the development of students' competence (Lecce et al., 2021). The term "mentalizing", on the other hand, appears in the research on teachers' mental functioning, including

on the role of this competence in coping with negative experiences (e.g. Schwarzer et al., 2021).

As Barraza and Rodríguez (2023) note, the common element of the definition of human teaching is the assumption that it takes understanding the mental states of others in order to perceive and recognise gaps in their knowledge or their lack of understanding. Bruner (2010) wrote that the basis of teaching is the teacher's views about the nature of the student's mind, and that by recognising ignorance or misconceptions, the person taking on the teaching role corrects these deficiencies through discussion, demonstration or explanation. Bruner (2010) also stated that the lack of attribution of mental states to others, including ignorance, implies the absence of any attempt to teach them. Also Kruger and Tomasello (1998) advocated defining teaching in terms of intentionally causing learning, which suggests a link between teaching and theory of mind. Wellman and Lagattuta (2004) point out that the formation of concepts about mental states shapes attempts to teach, even if such concepts are not absolutely necessary for teaching. The above considerations raise questions about the ability of teachers to infer the mental states of their students and the links between this ability and the functioning of teachers in their professional role and that of their students. However, it is only in recent years that a growing interest in teachers' ability to attribute mental states can be observed (cf. Masuda & Sannomiya, 2020). One of such studies focused on trying to answer the question of whether teachers are more competent in the area of mentalizing than people with a different educational profile (Barraza & Rodríguez, 2023). The researchers hypothesised that, due to their education and professional experience, expert teachers would have a higher ability to mentalize in both cognitive and affective aspects. It turned out that no differences were noticed between the teachers and the control group in the response accuracy, and, in addition, the teachers-experts needed more time to respond in tasks requiring complex affective reasoning. In the task that tested the cognitive and affective aspects of the theory of the mind of the first and second orders, a difference of two seconds was revealed between the study groups. According to the authors, it reflects different ways of responding to situations that require second-order affective mentalizing processes. They conclude that the reaction time of expert teachers in making complex affective inferences may be a reflection of the way they act in real school situations. A slower but more empathetic response is then more desirable than a quick non-empathetic response. However, the research conducted does not answer the question of whether slower processing is due to the active involvement of empathic processing or to weaker mentalizing abilities. This is an area that requires further research.

Teachers' Mentalizing Teachers as a Protective Factor

The research that makes it possible to consider the relationship between the ability to mentalize and teachers' functioning addresses issues such as professional burnout, well-being and stress. The relationship between professional burnout and mentalizing ability was undertaken by Safiye and colleagues (2023). The study was a cross-sectional one and it was conducted online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey* questionnaire was used to measure occupational burnout syndrome, while mentalizing ability was measured using the hypomentalizing and hypermentalizing scales from the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (RFQ-8). Hypomentalizing refers to poor ability to reflect on complex models of the minds of others or one's own. People with such ability tend to assess mental states by "guessing", sometimes referring to general laws or their past experiences, which sometimes leads to wrong conclusions. Hypermentalizing is also not a desirable state, as it involves generating mentalistic representations of actions without adequate evidence to support these models (Fonagy et al., 2016). In the studies analysed here, associations were tested between both types of abnormalities in reflective functioning and dimensions of professional burnout (emotional exhaustion, cynicism and feelings of reduced professional achievement). It was expected that the presence of both types of mentalizing abnormalities was positively related to emotional exhaustion and cynicism, and negatively related to feelings of personal professional achievement. It was further tested whether low mentalizing ability was a positive predictor of emotional exhaustion and cynicism and a negative predictor of feelings of personal achievement. The researchers noticed that hypomentalizing individuals manifested higher levels of emotional exhaustion and professional cynicism. At the same time, hypermentalizing individuals experienced lower levels of exhaustion and cynicism. The experience of personal achievement at work increased with an increase in hypermentalizing or dropped with a decrease in hypermentalizing. In turn, the experience of personal fulfillment at work decreased as hypomentalizing increased. This is one of the more interesting results obtained by the authors. This is because it can be suspected that a hypomentalizing person perceives his or her task in the role of teacher as a "transmitter of knowledge", and treats students as passive recipients of knowledge. Such a person neglects those areas of work in which he or she reveals his or her own mental states and reads them in others, and does not experience the frustration of inadequacies. Further analyses provide some confirmation of this claim. The authors of the study tested whether the ability to mentalize influences the level of each of the three dimensions of burnout. To do so, they built three separate regression models. They found that an increase in hypermentalizing contributed to a decrease in emotional exhaustion and cynicism, while increasing feelings of achievement at work. An increase

in hypermentalizing resulted in higher exhaustion and cynicism and, conversely to expectations, a higher sense of work achievement. The results indicate that hypermentalizing plays a role in preventing professional burnout. While interpreting the results with reference to the professional role of the teacher, it can be concluded that those who are convinced of their own infallibility in interpreting internal states and do not check their assumptions when communicating openly with colleagues and with students, at the same time do not feel the frustration of doubt or conflict in this area. Perhaps this serves as a mechanism for lowering the experience of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, while increasing the experience of personal achievement.

While analysing the above research findings, it is important to note the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, rigorous measures obliged schools to remote learning, causing an unprecedented shift in educational activities. In the following year, the development of the pandemic with sudden changes in the number of infections led to the adoption of further measures to limit the spread of the virus. The switch between remote and hybrid teaching contributed to an unpredictable work environment for teachers and to an increase in both perceived stress and psychopathological symptoms (e.g. Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik, 2021). During this time, the relationship between mentalizing and well-being/stress among teachers was analysed. Researchers assume that mentalizing may buffer subjectively experienced stress and severity of psychopathological symptoms, increasing well-being even at high levels of global distress (Schwarzer et al., 2021). A cross-sectional study with a group of German teachers assessed this relationship, including depressive symptoms, dysthymic symptoms, physiological symptoms, agoraphobia, social phobia, and distrust. Associations of the ability to mentalize with subjectively assessed stress (weak strength), as well as with well-being (moderate strength) were noticed. In line with previous studies (e.g. Luyten et al., 2020), negative associations between psychopathological symptoms and impaired mentalizing ability are to be expected, but this association was not captured in this group. Increased psychopathology and subjective experience of stress negatively affected teachers' well-being, whereas increased mentalizing positively affected well-being. It may, therefore, be a protective factor and thus allow teachers to process negative experiences in a more adaptive way. However, the researchers did not demonstrate a mediating role of mentalizing between stress and teacher well-being. Given the results of previous analyses with other samples, the research authors suggest that distress and mentalizing affect teacher well-being in two independent (negative and positive, respectively) ways. Mentalizing of teachers may not be directly related to the processing of current distress. Instead, it has an independent health-promoting effect on teachers' well-being, which may indicate a protective but rather passive role of mentalizing in stress processing. Levante et al. (2023) perceive the role of mentalizing in a similar way. The researchers expected an

influence of mentalizing in emotion processing on the relationship between depressive symptoms, anxiety and depersonalisation as a dimension of burnout. They also posed a backward hypothesis. They hypothesised that emotion processing ability, as a component of affective mentality, may be an individual resource that allows teachers to manage negative emotions by modulating their intensity or adapting them to their working conditions. The study was cross-sectional and it was conducted during the pandemic between September 2021 and January 2022 in Italy. The results confirmed the assumptions: the fewer negative feelings experienced by teachers towards students or work activities, the lower the level of depressive symptoms and anxiety through the mediating role played by higher levels of emotion processing capacity. These results confirm that teachers' individual resources are protective factors against the development of stress-related symptomatology.

While analysing previous research, it can be noted that mentalizing is related to attachment theory (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Secure attachment relationships are thought to provide an adaptive learning environment in which children can develop mentalizing skills through the sensitive reflection of their feelings by attachment figures. In turn, non-secure attachment relationships may hinder the development of children's mentalizing abilities due to poor adjustment between children and attachment figures (Luyten et al., 2017). In this context, mentalizing can be conceptualised as a mechanism mediating the processing of aversive experiences under stress (Fonagy et al., 2016). However, the impact of non-secure attachment or mentalizing abilities on stressful experiences in educational contexts is unknown. This issue was addressed by Schwarzer and colleagues (2023). The study took place during the pandemic period, it was cross-sectional in nature and the subjects studied were students of teaching faculties. They completed three questionnaires measuring manifestations of attachment, reflective functioning and global stress experience. In the analysed sample, mentalizing disorder was associated with global stress experience. However, attachment-related avoidance was not associated with either stress experience or mentalizing. A partial mediation effect was found for the association between attachment anxiety and stress experience, but not between attachment avoidance and stress experience. In summary, attachment and mentalizing disorders together explained 39.8% of the variance in stress experienced by the research participants. According to the researchers, the results suggest that attachment anxiety, arising from one's own experience of an attachment figure in childhood, promotes limitations in the ability to mentalize. This, in turn, is associated with an increase in overall stress experiences. However, due to the nature of the research, causal interpretations are limited.

Undoubtedly, the importance of this research lies in pointing out that stress levels in teachers or future teachers cannot be fully explained by contextual factors such as class size, curriculum, school location or others. To some extent, teachers' stress levels

depend on their individual characteristics and are linked with ineffective coping strategies (Schwarzer et al., 2023).

Teachers' Mentalizing as a Facilitating Factor

The benefits of teachers' mentalizing abilities for classroom group functioning are highlighted by the authors of the TiM (*Thought in Mind*) project aimed at children and adults (parents or teachers). The authors hypothesise that the creation of a "mentalizing community" in the classroom will not only foster the development of the ability to take others' perspectives, but it will also become the basis for mental resilience. The study designed by Valle and his colleagues (2016) involved two classes consisting of a total of 46 students aged 10 years, and two teachers. The classes were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, and the teachers were subject to differential content training (with and without mentalizing). The results revealed differences in the dominant attribution style of the pupils before and after teacher mentalizing training. The use of coaching reduced the tendency towards an inadequate, overly positive attribution style, which is perceived as a feature of externalising and antisocial disorders. The students' ability to make rational judgements about other students' judgements concerning themselves increased (Valle et al., 2016). According to the authors, the study provides preliminary results about the role of mentalization training in the prevention of psychopathology.

In another discussion, Valle and his colleagues (2022) refer to the concept of *mind-mindedness* which originally referred to the attachment mother-child relationship. The authors suggest to use the mindfulness model which denotes the tendency of a caregiver to perceive his/her child as a being with desires and feelings; to explain the relationship between teacher's mentalizing and attachment representation and theory of mind in children during late childhood. Sixteen female teachers and 47 students participated in the research. The teachers created free-form descriptions of their students (randomly assigned to them) and completed the *Mentalized Affectivity Scale* (MAS) to assess the mentalizing ability. The students completed a semi-structured test to assess the student-teacher attachment relationship (SAT-School), as well as tests to measure theory of mind. It was found that autobiographical memories and experiences shared by teachers enable a relational climate in the classroom and open children up to mentalizing. At the same time, the teacher's tendency to describe students in terms of physical characteristics is associated with a low ability of students to mentalize. The results of the study suggest that autobiographical memory revealed in the dimension of mentalized affectivity can foster the construction of an educational

relationship. The authors of the study suggest that teachers' mentalizing can be seen as a protective factor to prevent difficult situations in the classroom (Valle et al., 2022).

The teacher's focus on mental states during interaction with the student may be a factor in his or her development. Martilla et al. (2023) suggested a study based on VERP (*Video Enhanced Reflective Practice*) training. They were interested in determining the frequency of utterances involving meta-language (language referring to mental processes) and their content. To this end, they collected recordings of classroom interactions, which were then commented on during a group discussion with the trainer and other teachers. The teachers participating in the study were encouraged to reflect on the interaction activities. It turned out that teachers referred to children's and adults' mental states with the same frequency in conversations after watching the video. During the meeting, teachers were more likely to mention cognitive and motivational topics than emotional ones. When discussing adult actions, they commented on cognitive processes, e.g. thinking and remembering. When referring to pupils' behaviour, they paid attention to motivational aspects, desires and wishes. In addition to examining the frequency of metalinguistic statements and their content, the authors considered the relationship between the occurrence of metalinguistic elements and teachers' reported interaction competence. It was found that teachers who had positive perceptions of their interaction skills were more likely to engage in metalinguistic reflection. Other studies have shown that interactions rich in language describing mental states and discourse encouraging consideration of others' perspectives are important mechanisms in the development of theory of mind (Lecce et al., 2021).

The relationship between the teacher's use of meta-language and the development of children's theory of mind during middle childhood was also sought by Wu and his colleagues (2021). Their quasi-experiment involved 56 preschool children randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. The children in the experimental group participated in teacher-led conversational and role-play activities about feelings, emotions and beliefs for three months, while the control group did not. The researchers found statistically significant differences between the groups in the unexpected change test after the training, but not before.

Conclusions

The review of the research allows some conclusions to be drawn about the importance of the ability to mentalize in a group of teachers. It is possible to consider this ability as a protective factor for teachers' well-being, as well as a facilitator of student development and classroom relationships. Although most of the research on teachers themselves is conducted in a cross-sectional pattern, it indicates that mentalizing plays

a role in reducing feelings of stress and professional burnout. It can also be assumed that the ability to accurately interpret and respond to students' internal states fosters a learning environment that benefits all participants in the learning process. Thus, as the authors of the presented research postulate, it is worth supporting the development of the ability to mentalize in teachers, thus providing them with a tool to improve their own functioning as well as their relationship with students.

Limitations of the Studies Analysed

Several limitations need to be taken into account when interpreting the data from the review. First, depending on the problem posed and the relationships established, researchers adopt different research approaches. In verifying hypotheses about the relationship between mentalizing and teachers' professional well-being, questionnaire studies dominate. Such studies use self-report instruments that are biased by nature. Further research using more direct measures of mentalizing (e.g. Brown et al. 2019) with greater ecological validity is needed. Furthermore, any causal interpretations in cross-sectional studies rely on theoretical assumptions, making longitudinal studies necessary to replicate the results. In contrast, when examining the relationship between teacher's mentalizing and student's functioning, quasi-experimental studies, the use of coaching, or semi-structured studies are suggested. Second, most of the studies analysed were conducted during the pandemic. Research is needed to test whether the associations between the variables studied differ according to the pandemic situation. Third, the review of studies done is not a systematic review. However, it should be pointed out that there is little research on the above issues and, moreover, no such reports are currently available in Poland. There is also a lack of data on the role that the teachers' ability to mentalize may play in the context of current changes in education towards inclusive education.

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