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Problems of Reversed Roles in the Family: Necessary Knowledge of the Teacher and Measures to Help Parentalized Students

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this article is to examine the phenomenon of parentification, exploring its concept, characteristics, underlying causes, and both short-term and long-term consequences. Special attention is given to the imperative of spreading awareness of this phenomenon among educators. The research questions addressed include: What defines role reversal in families and what are its repercussions? How can teachers leverage specialized knowledge to implement support measures in schools?

Research methods: The article takes a theoretical and review-based approach, employing methods such as analysis of scientific literature and examination of existing data.

Structure of the article: The author delves into the phenomenon of parentification, beginning with an exploration of its definition and classification, while also considering the mechanisms that contribute to its occurrence. Additionally, she underscores its significance for the child's present and future functioning, with both immediate and long-term consequences.

Furthermore, the author emphasizes the necessity of diagnostic and supportive actions to be undertaken by teachers in response to this issue.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: In this analysis, it was posited that parentification, defined as a reversal of roles within the family dynamic between parent and child, represents a complex and multifaceted process that is increasingly widespread in contemporary society. The ongoing societal shifts affecting modern families significantly contribute to the emergence of family role reversal. The article explores the current understanding of the phenomenon and highlights its practical implications for the role of teachers within the school environment.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The article underscores the importance of enhancing teachers' understanding of parentification and the challenges inherent in diagnosing this phenomenon. It suggests the utilization of specific projective methods for diagnosis, along with outlining potential forms of support and preventive measures that teachers can implement within the school setting.

Keywords: family role reversal, parentification, teacher role, diagnosis, assistance for parentified students

Introduction

Parentification, characterized by a reversal of roles within the family between parent and child, is a complex, diverse, and multifaceted process. Moreover, it is a prevalent phenomenon today, closely linked to the challenging circumstances faced by many families. Factors contributing to this include the growing number of divorces and separations, the rise of blended families, single-parent households, temporary parental absences, a mounting prevalence of addiction and mental health issues, and economic hardships. The ongoing civilizational shifts affecting modern families are significantly contributing to role reversals in this context.

In Polish psychological and pedagogical literature, parentification remains poorly understood and documented, both theoretically and

empirically. This lack of understanding hampers the dissemination of knowledge and the development of specific strategies to support affected children and families, as well as the implementation of preventive measures, including those within school settings.

This article takes a theoretical and review-oriented approach, employing methods such as the analysis of scientific literature and existing data from various studies. Its aim is to provide a scientific reflection on parentification, explore its concept, nuances, underlying causes, and both immediate and long-term consequences. Particular emphasis is placed on the importance of spreading awareness of this phenomenon among educators, thus empowering them to take appropriate action concerning students and their families.

The process of parentification—terminology

The term “parentification,” as discussed by Jolanta Żarczyńska-Hyla and Jolanta Piechnik-Borusowska (2018), entered the scientific literature in the 1970s, thanks to American psychiatrists Ivan Boszormeny-Nagy and Geraldine Spark. The term comes from the Latin words *parentes* (parents) and *facere* (to do). Parentification occurs when one or both parents partially or completely give up their parental tasks and responsibilities, delegating these roles to one of the children, usually the eldest and often a girl. This results in the child acting as a substitute for the parents rather than simply supporting them. In academic literature, this concept is also referred to as inverted parental role, parental role inversion, filial responsibility, or role confusion (Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018, p. 291).

Role inversion in the family (parentification), according to Katarzyna Schier (2018, p. 29), occurs when a child sacrifices their own existential and emotional needs to secure parental care: The child must fulfill the needs of their caregivers to gain their care, which leads to a disruption in the parent-child relationship. Similarly, Żarczyńska-Hyla and Piechnik-Borusowska (2018) note that a parentified child submits to the caregivers’ demands to meet their needs for safety, closeness, comfort, consolation,

and play, at the expense of their own needs for autonomy, separation, and making personal choices. This disrupts the child's development. Parentification violates the boundaries between parents and children, upsets the family hierarchy, and causes numerous adverse consequences for the child. However, the authors also point out that "a certain degree of parentification is experienced and present in the life of every child, and its positive consequence is that the child learns responsibility, caring, and higher empathic abilities" (Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018, p. 291).

An important aspect of parentification is its transgenerational nature. This means that the mechanism of its formation should be considered across at least three successive generations (grandparents, parents, and children), with particular attention to role reversal with one's own parents. Often, parents replicate the patterns they experienced with their parents onto their children. This intergenerational transmission results from a disruption in bond formation (Grzegorzewska, 2016; Schier, 2016; Schier, 2018).

The literature highlights the complexity and heterogeneity of parentification, emphasizing the need to distinguish it from related processes to appropriately tailor support and assistance measures for families. Stephanie Haxhe (2016) identified three related processes besides parentification, each characterized by different parental expectations of the child, the child's needs, the type of burden placed on the child, its suitability to the child's abilities and competencies, the child's level of sacrifice, and the context. Haxhe described paternalization as parents receiving assistance from the child in their parental roles and support at certain times, without overwhelming the child's capabilities, which can promote maturity. Adultization involves pushing the child to grow up quickly, gain autonomy, and maturity, without performing parental functions. Delegation, in turn, occurs when the child is given a mission by the parents to provide direction and purpose to the parents' life. Haxhe (2016) stresses that all three processes can turn into parentification when they become too demanding and taxing on the child, and surpasses what the child can reasonably handle.

Parentification is a complex process. When a child does not take on parental roles, they may resort to other coping mechanisms related to the potential for parentification. These can include running away from

problems, escaping into illness, displaying apathetic behavior, aggression, indifference, and passivity (Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018).

Types of parentification - detailed overview of the phenomenon, its determinants and effects

Early research on parentification primarily focused on the risk factors and developmental threats faced by parentified children. This phenomenon was often linked to neglect, humiliation, and emotional rejection by parents, leading to potential social dysfunction. In the 1980s, the concept of grooming, a subtype of role reversal, emerged. Grooming involves parents using their children to fulfill their own needs for intimacy, flirtation, or excessive physical closeness. Today, parentification is also strongly associated with over-protection. Over-protected children fail to develop autonomy and independence because their parents treat them as extensions of themselves. These children become vehicles for fulfilling their caregivers' unfulfilled ambitions and dreams. Consequently, parents may dictate their children's educational and professional paths or influence their choice of life partners. As a result, many adults who were overprotected in childhood expect their own children to take care of them and assume the role of a child, reversing the parent-child roles (Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018).

Parentification is commonly categorized into two types: instrumental (action-based) parentification and emotional parentification (Jurkovic, 1997; Rostowska & Borchet, 2016; Schier, 2018; Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018; Żłobicki, 2018). Instrumental parentification involves children taking on responsibilities typically borne by adults, such as earning money, caring for siblings or an ill/disabled parent, and managing household tasks like cleaning, shopping, and meal preparation. This form of parentification is sometimes seen in immigrant families, where children act as cultural guides and interpreters. Some scholars believe that instrumental parentification is less detrimental to children than emotional parentification because it is easier for children to adapt to practical

roles than to emotional ones, which entail greater psychological stress (Rostowska & Borchet, 2016; Żłobicki, 2018).

Emotional parentification, on the other hand, involves children meeting the emotional and social needs of other family members. This can include providing emotional support, being sensitive to others' moods, and being cast in a variety of roles: a parent's comforter or confidant, a parent's therapist or caregiver, a buffer, mediator or judge in marital conflicts, a partner (including a sexual partner), or a scapegoat. The child might also serve as a narcissistic extension of the parent, embodying the parent's ideal self, offering admiration over the parent's behavior or appearance, or as a container for the parent's negative emotions (Scheir, 2018, pp. 29–30). When a child fulfills multiple emotional roles simultaneously, the psychological consequences can be profound and multifaceted.

Considering the consequences of parentification, scholars have differentiated between two types: destructive (pathological) and constructive (adaptive) parentification (Chase, 1999; Rostowska & Borchet, 2016). Destructive parentification occurs in atypical family conditions, such as parental addiction or mental and physical illness, which force a reversal of roles and hierarchies within the family. This form of parentification is often seen as a type of emotional abuse, neglect, or hidden child abuse. Researchers (e.g., Scheir, 2018; Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018; Żłobicki, 2018) suggest that the child's sense of injustice or harm is a crucial criterion for assessing the experience of parentification. The absence of reinforcement, lack of recognition for the child's efforts, criticism, or unfair treatment while imposing long-term responsibilities inappropriate for the child's age and capabilities can disrupt the child's functioning and heighten their sense of harm.

Schier (2018, p. 32) notes that children who are destructively parentified are often labeled as "brave," "good," or "grown-up" because they become invisible to themselves and are forced to grow up prematurely. These children, burdened with adult roles, cannot pursue their developmental tasks, including educational ones, or experience childhood like their peers. This situation, which exceeds the child's capabilities and depletes their resources, may lead to numerous adverse outcomes: substance

abuse, depression, high emotional control, academic difficulties, feelings of loneliness and social isolation, mental disorders, challenges in forming relationships and building healthy bonds, poor parenting skills in adulthood, the replication of parentification patterns, and low levels of security in their relationships with parents (Rostowska & Borchet, 2016). Schier highlights the paradox of parentification, noting that these children often suffer in silence, unaware of their burdens, and may even take pride in their commitment to their caregivers (2018, p. 33). Destructive parentification leaves no room for the child's individual development.

In contrast, constructive parentification provides an environment conducive to developing independence without imposing excessive emotional or physical burdens on the child. In such cases, families recognize and value the child's contributions to the community, express gratitude, validate them, and reward them. These circumstances enable the child to feel valued, loved, and essential, fostering a sense of reciprocity in familial relationships. Consequently, the child develops a sense of competence and agency, acquiring skills related to maintaining relationships and assuming responsibility (Schier, 2018; Rostowska & Borchet, 2016; Żarczyńska-Hyla & Piechnik-Borusowska, 2018). Constructive parentification may be temporary, such as during a family crisis, where the child may not experience adverse effects but instead develops a heightened sense of responsibility (Schier, 2018).

Constructive parentification, as emphasized by Teresa Rostowska and Judyta Borchet (2016), can also nurture the development of psychological resilience in response to adversity. Resilience is characterized by adaptive coping mechanisms, healthy psychological growth, and the capacity to form meaningful relationships. The level and robustness of resilience are shaped by various factors, including a child's physical appearance, personality traits, social acumen, sense of humor, temperament, and social support. The presence of a nurturing adult figure, often termed the "caregiver of resilience," can mitigate the effects of parentification by providing essential support and guidance. Moreover, adaptability which is a characteristic of resilience enables the child to navigate diverse challenges, develop autonomy, and acquire a repertoire of skills essential for future challenges.

Żarczyńska-Hyla and Piechnik-Borusowska (2018) identified a multitude of factors correlated with the assumption of reversed parental roles by children. These include poor family dynamics, prolonged conflicts, parental substance abuse, personality disorders, parental immaturity, chronic physical and mental illnesses, familial disintegration, significant life events, as well as the unique personality and demographic traits of parentified children. Furthermore, the perpetuation of parentification can be attributed in part to contemporary cultural norms, which either tolerate or actively endorse role reversal within families (Schier, 2018; Żłobicki, 2018). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the media, where children exhibiting behaviors associated with destructive parentification are often portrayed as “everyday heroes,” showcasing their efforts in rescuing parents or caring for siblings.

Despite its prevalence, parentification is not classified as a psychiatric symptom in ICD-10 or DSM-V, as emphasized by Iwona Grzegorzewska (2016, p. 28). However, research suggests that parentification is a significant predictor of the development of narcissistic and masochistic personality disorders.

The role of the teacher in recognizing parentification and carrying out psycho-educational measures

The phenomenon of role reversal in children is often identified by individuals outside the immediate family, such as grandparents, teachers, or sports coaches. Parentification is a latent experience, which makes it challenging to diagnose in children. In contrast, diagnosing this issue in adults is easier due to the visibility of long-term effects, including specific personality traits, depression, social isolation, trust issues, social anxiety, pervasive feelings of shame and guilt, somatization of mental states, psychosomatic disorders, and body image disturbances. In children, diagnoses are typically made incidentally, often occurring while other issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, or social phobia are being addressed. Currently,

there are no established psychological or pedagogical tools specifically for diagnosing role reversal in children. Schier (2018), drawing on her experience with parentified individuals, suggests that determining role reversal requires analyzing the child's narrative and play behavior (e.g., Scenotest), assessing selected projective tests (e.g., the Three Wishes test), and conducting problem-oriented interviews with parents.

It is crucial to note that parents often do not recognize the role reversal process occurring within their family and may exhibit conscious or unconscious resistance. In such cases, it is beneficial for parents to consider their multigenerational context and experiences. Parental resistance often hinders providing help to parentified children, who may only seek assistance in adulthood when the burden of parentification becomes overwhelming. Considering the transgenerational perspective and seeing one's family history in a broader context can be very helpful in letting go of the desire to blame and take revenge on one's caregivers. (Schier, 2018). This perspective enables a person to examine their family's history with its complex conditions in mind, which can lead to acceptance of the past and changes in their own life.

Therefore, it is essential for teachers and educators to be informed about this phenomenon, as they can play a key role in averting the emergence of harmful parentification symptoms in children, provided it has not occurred already. A teacher's diagnosis can serve as a protective factor and a form of support for the child since the child and their problems will be noticed. In both diagnosing and working with students experiencing role reversal, projective methods are crucial due to the uniqueness and complex consequences of the phenomenon.

To identify a parentified child in the classroom, special attention should be paid to students coming from dysfunctional families. These children often exhibit distinct behaviors compared to their peers. They may appear more serious and mature, struggle with spontaneous play and behavior, and have difficulty working together with others. Instead, they tend to be very accommodating, take on responsibility for others, prefer working independently, to handle everything on their own and prioritize others' needs over their own, often struggling to articulate their own

needs. They also frequently volunteer to assist teachers and staff with various tasks and demonstrate perfectionist tendencies in their actions. Additionally, when experiencing difficulties, they may experience feelings of guilt (Grzegorzewska, 2016; Schier, 2016).

An educator well-versed in the mechanisms of parentification can discern nuanced behaviors among students within the classroom setting. Children who are overly helpful and caring, “polite,” accommodating and brave may belong to the risk group. However, identifying a child undergoing parentification may prove elusive for educators, as such children are unlikely to manifest disruptive behaviors in class; on the contrary, they tend to be helpful, eager to assist with various tasks and facilitate the teacher’s responsibilities. If educators lack an understanding of familial role reversal, they may exacerbate these tendencies by inadvertently perpetuating behaviors associated with excessive care for others, and with being “a brave child.” Consequently, it becomes imperative for teachers to refrain from augmenting the child’s “grown-up” role through additional tasks, while simultaneously engaging in transparent dialogue to elucidate the rationale behind their instructional strategies (Schier, 2016). Nonetheless, efforts should be directed towards fostering the student’s resilience.

The teacher or educator may collaborate with a school counselor or psychologist to conduct a targeted assessment of parentification and formulate an intervention plan tailored to the needs of specific students, also involving consideration of other family members who could potentially serve as sources of support or compensatory roles. Additionally, diagnosing parentification may prompt the child’s family to seek therapeutic interventions, including individual, family, or marital therapy, at specialized institutions possibly recommended by the school (Schier, 2018; Żłobicki, 2018). Moreover, as part of preventive measures, educational initiatives targeting caregivers can be organized within the school premises as part of parental education endeavors, aimed at disseminating knowledge and enhancing parental awareness of parentification dynamics. The school’s collaboration with the family and local community resources, such as psychological-educational counseling centers, may entail the development and distribution of informative materials, as well as

the organization of workshops tailored for parents, families, and children on this pertinent issue.

Conclusion

The examination presented in this article regarding parentification and its implications for teacher actions within the school setting yields several key insights. Firstly, given the multifaceted nature and growing prevalence of parentification, educators must continually enhance their understanding of this phenomenon (e.g., through appropriate training), in order to make informed decisions both in the classroom and in collaboration with parents. Secondly, there is a pressing need to disseminate knowledge about role reversal and its ramifications within Polish families and society at large, a goal that can be pursued through preventive measures implemented by schools. Knowledge serves as a catalyst for change. Effective diagnosis and support strategies for parentified students and their families necessitate close collaboration between teachers and school counselors/psychologists, as well as partnerships with specialized counseling centers within the local community. As part of comprehensive parental education initiatives, schools can offer psychoeducational workshops aimed at enhancing parental skills and promoting effective communication within families, thereby empowering parents to establish resilient family structures and mitigate the risk of role reversal. Concurrently, preventive and educational efforts within schools should also target students, recognizing the influence of contemporary societal changes that may contribute to parentification and the corresponding need for intensified interventions.

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