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## Interpersonal closeness as a pedagogical category fostering the integration of educational environments: families and schools

Submitted: 24.12.2024

Accepted: 31.10.2025

Published: 31.12.2025



### Keywords:

interpersonal  
closeness,  
educational  
environment,  
family, school,  
integration

### Abstract

**Research objectives (aims) and problem(s):** The aim of this article is to examine the phenomenon of interpersonal closeness in relation to family–school cooperation. The author defines interpersonal closeness as a pedagogical category and discusses the unifying role of the pedagogy of interpersonal closeness in cooperation between educational environments. The following research questions were posed: *What characterizes interpersonal closeness understood as a pedagogical category? What is the unifying role of interpersonal closeness in family–school cooperation?*

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

**Process of argumentation:** The author explores the phenomenon of interpersonal closeness, beginning with etymological analyses and references to other scientific fields. He presents interpersonal closeness as a pedagogical category, defines it, and characterizes the pedagogy of closeness. The author draws attention to family and school as educational environments in which closeness can be developed. He emphasizes the importance of cooperation between these environments and the role of interpersonal closeness in strengthening that cooperation.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences:** The author draws attention to the relatively underexamined phenomenon of interpersonal closeness. The analyses support

the thesis that interpersonal closeness can be treated as a pedagogical category of great importance for the development of all participants in the educational process and for their cooperation. The results indicate a need for a pedagogy of closeness, as it can guide both the building of interpersonal relationships and the overcoming of difficulties that arise in this process. The author provides pedagogical implications that are relevant to the development of interpersonal closeness in the family–school relationship.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Referring to the pedagogical category of closeness may constitute a key to interpreting situations that occur in the family–school relationship. The analysis may serve as a basis for further discussion on the place and significance of closeness in education.

## Introduction

After the period of social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for closeness became even more important. The requirement to remain apart and the inability to show closeness through words or touch caused suffering for many people (Durkin et al., 2021, p. 1). Due to immediate threats to health and even life, interpersonal closeness was curtailed precisely when it was most desperately needed. In societies emerging from the pandemic and characterized by excessive individualism (Barnat, 2009, p. 3), the need to emphasize the importance of interpersonal closeness is increasingly recognized. The need to create strong interpersonal ties also applies to education. At the interface of its formal and informal dimensions, closeness appears as a category that can foster the integration of the subjects of education.

The article takes a theoretical and review-based approach, using methods such as analysis of scientific literature and examination of available empirical data. Its aim is to present scholarly reflections on interpersonal closeness in relation to cooperation between family and school. The analysis focuses on the understanding of interpersonal closeness as a pedagogical category. The unifying role of the pedagogy of interpersonal closeness in the cooperation of educational environments is presented.

## The concept of interpersonal closeness

Etymologically, the word *closeness* is derived from Latin (*clausus*) and has its origin in Old French *clos*. Its original meanings, dating back to the 12th century, have negative overtones (to shut, cover in, close, block, make inaccessible, put an end to something) (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The positive and warm connotation of *closeness* in English began to appear in the 16th century and led to the modern view of closeness as an intense interpersonal relationship. Relating the results of English-language analyses to the understanding of closeness in Polish, one can see a similar semantic shift. Researchers point to the affinity of the Old Polish word “close” with the Latin *fligere* (to beat, strike), suggesting that closeness has a reference to *conflict* (Latin *conflictus*) (Długosz-Kurczabowa, 2008, p. 54). In Old Polish, a close person was someone who left scars during a conflict (the similarity between the English words *close* and *scar* and the Polish words *bliski* and *blizna*). “Scarring,” that is, the formation of closeness, is a process in which inflicted wounds are healed, severed fragments of the human body are united, and painful injuries are sealed. Referring to these etymological analyses, it can be assumed that the word *closeness* includes not only warmth and openness but also the effort to overcome circumstances that hinder close human relations.

The issue of close interpersonal relationships has been addressed in various scientific disciplines. In psychology, there are references to the formation and importance of interpersonal bonds, especially in relation to attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1983). In philosophy, the topic is often discussed in connection with phenomenology or philosophical hermeneutics (Lévinas, 1999; Ricoeur, 1984, p. 275). Educational sciences have also become an area in which human intimacy is explored, granting it the status of a pedagogical category.

## Characteristics of interpersonal closeness as a pedagogical category

The concept of *category* has its origins in philosophy, the natural sciences, and mathematics. Aristotle defined categories as the most general classes of entities. For Immanuel Kant, a *category* is a principle that enables us to distinguish classes of objects. Thus, categories are forms of thought through which humans organize their experiences (Frejusz, 2021, p. 34). According to Józef Górniewicz, categories are elements of “real or symbolic reality, constituting a certain functional whole, being a compilation of elements belonging to various objects of reality, also structured in some way” (Górniewicz, 2001, p. 7). A category may therefore be understood as an important concept distinguished by its significance in a particular field of scientific inquiry.

Closeness analyzed as a pedagogical category is understood as the intensified and deepened presence of two or more subjects participating in an emotional–spiritual relationship. Constructive closeness results from the educational effort involved in establishing and maintaining communication with another person (Żywczok, 2013, p. 29). Thus, interpersonal closeness may be defined as “the intense co-presence of people forming a relationship, the purpose of which is mutual endowment, and the intensity, shape, and expression of closeness depend on their individual conditions and beliefs” (Godawa, 2023, p. 303). In this conceptualization, closeness is experienced in individual, social, spatial, and spiritual contexts, which gives it the status of a universal category. It should be emphasized that closeness has a personal dimension, since only human participation in such a relationship allows its full expression. The purpose of closeness is mutual endowment, that is, the sharing of good that serves the other person.

The process of establishing and deepening closeness has the characteristics of pedagogy, in other words, a relatively coherent and lasting set of educational practices through which an individual assimilates and develops forms of conduct, knowledge, skills, and criteria for their evaluation, adopting them from a person regarded as competent to transmit

and assess them (Hejnicka-Bezwińska, 2008, p. 493). Therefore, the pedagogy of interpersonal closeness may be understood as “a resource of experiences and methods undertaken to build closeness between people” (Godawa, 2023, p. 175). Achieving interpersonal closeness does not happen automatically; it requires intentional actions aimed at building bridges between people. These actions have an educational dimension. For this reason, they represent the implementation of values and the adoption of attitudes consistent with human needs, and they are aimed at supporting human development.

Closeness has internal regulations that protect against violating the well-being of the other person. One characteristic of closeness understood as a pedagogical category is discretion, which in this case involves pursuing goals that are not directly related to upbringing yet have an educational impact. This assumption of the pedagogy of closeness is particularly carried out by individuals who are explorers, those who constantly examine themselves and their surroundings, who are active and engaged, and who function effectively thanks to well-developed interpersonal communication (Waloszek, 2014, pp. 235–236). Interpersonal closeness is based on values. Values form the basis for establishing the goals of educational interactions and also inspire initiatives for building closeness. Shared values make it easier for people to develop closeness, and their interplay shapes close social relationships (van der Wal et al., 2024, p. 1066). The axiological dimension of closeness gives it an ethical context that protects the well-being of those in close relationships from abuse.

Closeness has its own methodology, which determines the actions taken to achieve the adopted educational goals. Methods for building closeness involve the systematic interaction of educational actors (Kazubowska, 2020, p. 254) and are aimed at shaping the child’s personality, attitudes, values, and behavior. Methods of developing interpersonal closeness include, for example, dialogue and silence, suggestion, persuasion, instruction, task-based methods, the use of touch, organizing experiences, and self-education (Godawa, 2023, p. 176). These methods are anchored in the educational relationship, which is a special form

of interaction between parent, teacher, and child. Building trust, communication, and an appropriate level of involvement are prerequisites for their effectiveness. The methods promote the child's independence and responsibility. They support development in a targeted, informed, and individualized manner, reinforcing values and life skills. Achieving these goals requires that those responsible for upbringing possess appropriate competencies (Jaszczyzyn & Cichocki, 2015). The process of fostering closeness is most fully realized in the family and school environments.

### **Family and school as educational environments that strengthen interpersonal closeness**

The educational environment in which the process of upbringing takes place can be understood as a system of interrelated elements that are mutually conditioned and interact with one another. The upbringing environment includes individuals and social groups with whom the child is engaged in an educational relationship. It also encompasses educational institutions and natural communities, primarily the family, local communities, associations, mass media, and the values that shape a person (Przećławska, 2009, pp. 17–18). The environmental approach in education is aimed at meeting students' educational needs.

The family is a unique environment that enables human functioning. It is a small social group composed of parents, their children, and relatives, united by marital and parental bonds, which is the basis of educational interactions (Okoń, 2004, p. 351). The family environment responds to a child's natural needs, primarily its psychological needs, such as the need for love, a sense of security and closeness, belonging and respect, dignity and beauty, as well as the need for role models and ideals (Kawula, 2001, p. 111). Moreover, the family is the chief setting responsible for shaping personality, emotions, behavior, attention, health, and the atmosphere of the home. It constitutes the space in which human personality is formed and serves as a source of both knowledge and upbringing (Dwiningtyas & Hajaroh, 2023, p. 530).



Among the most important factors that define the family as an educational environment are its structure, the fulfillment of its basic functions, emotional relationships within the family, and styles of upbringing. We must also note those areas of family life that may contribute to a student's educational difficulties. These include material conditions, the family's cultural background, dysfunctions and crises in upbringing, the breakdown of the parents' marriage, and the social deprivation of the mother and father (Sikorski, 2013, p. 159). The family is in the process of constant social change, which affects its current form (Błasiak, 2024).

As Andrzej Janke notes, upbringing in the family includes educational influence aimed at the development of the psyche and personality, the formation of a sense of personal identity, and changes in the behavior of those being raised. This kind of upbringing takes into account the possibility of parallel transformation in the areas of psyche, personality, sense of identity, and the educational activity of those who assume the role of educators in a given situation (Janke, 2017, p. 496). Understood in this way, upbringing is a wide-ranging activity undertaken by all actors directly or indirectly involved in educational processes. As Samita points out, family upbringing also has a socialization function:

A family is the first social institution through which a child receives education for sociability. The family is a primary social group; it establishes relationships among individuals in a straightforward and direct way. It helps promote academic achievement and fosters the development of various social skills. Hence, the family environment has the full potential to act as a vehicle for students to improve self-esteem, develop social skills, and ultimately adjust to their school environment. (Samita, 2021, p. 985)

One of the important areas of family upbringing is the building of social ties. It is in the family that a child gains its first experiences through which it can recognize and form interpersonal relationships. Family ties result from the internal and external forces operating in the family and exerting influence on its members, expressed in family–social bonds

(Gałęska, 2015, p. 29). In this sense, upbringing for closeness in the family consists of interactions among family members that shape the sense of closeness. The goal of upbringing for closeness is to support the child and its multifaceted development, enrich its personality and experiences, assist in self-realization, and prepare the child for self-reliance in building mature closeness in social relations.

School is described as one of the basic components of society and represents an important part of the educational environment and the life activities of children and adolescents (Rozenbajgier, 2019, p. 8). As an educational environment alongside the family home, school influences the formation of students' attitudes (Kluczyńska, 2024, p. 265). The educational environment can be defined as the physical and social context in which the teaching and learning process occurs. It includes the physical environment, teacher–student interactions, and the culture of the classroom (Ibragimov et al., 2023). Most scholars agree that students' academic achievement depends on learning conditions (Malik & Rizvi, 2018, p. 208). The more advanced a society is, the more important the role of schools becomes in preparing the younger generation for community life.

As Riaz Hussain Malik and Asad Abbas Rizvi note, formal education occurs in the context of social relations:

The teaching–learning process cannot take place in a vacuum. In formal education settings, it occurs as a result of interaction among members of the classroom. In classroom settings, elements of the teaching–learning process include teacher, students, content, learning process and learning situation. (Malik & Rizvi, 2018, p. 208)

The pattern of interaction between teachers and students creates a particular atmosphere that may be called a learning situation. This situation is also referred to as the psychosocial environment of the classroom.

Social relations in school education form the foundation for building interpersonal closeness in the process of teaching and learning. The key assumption of closeness is subjectivity, which is an essential attribute of the educational process. As Anna Izabela Brzezińska (2008, p. 49) notes,



building a sense of security based on respect for the autonomy of all participants in the educational process is a fundamental premise of school education. This is an important element of interpersonal closeness and, at the same time, a safeguard against abuse in school relationships. Violations of students' dignity and inviolability are a denial of true closeness and thus interfere with its proper understanding (Godawa, 2020, p. 121).

One of the factors that determines the establishment of safe closeness is the introduction and observance of boundaries between closeness and separateness. This occurs at the level of interpersonal relations, intergroup relations, and relations with the external environment (Konieczna, 2019, p. 79). By respecting these boundaries, interpersonal closeness at school does not violate the well-being of any participants in the teaching–learning process.

### **The role of interpersonal closeness in the cooperation of family and school**

Cooperation between family and school is an important factor that strengthens the process of upbringing and the child's development. A teacher performs his or her duties most effectively when supported by the family environment. The family environment influences teacher performance, and support from family members helps create a positive environment for teachers (Dwiningtyas & Hajaroh, 2023, p. 530). Cooperation with the student's family also enhances teacher job satisfaction. It should be emphasized that this cooperation is an obligation arising from relevant legal acts; it is therefore a normative task, which further reinforces its legitimacy (Regulation of the Minister of National Education, 2017).

This collaboration is also important in situations where the family does not adequately fulfill its functions. The school environment then has the opportunity to carry out tasks that partially compensate for shortcomings in the home environment. In addition to educators and teachers, school pedagogues play an important role. They provide support

to students and their parents who experience difficult situations that affect the student's functioning in the school environment (Kluczyńska, 2024, p. 265). Proper intervention in a family environment experiencing educational difficulties contributes to better academic performance among children. To achieve this goal, it is essential to provide tools and strategies for the integral development of children that facilitate appropriate communication, the expression of feelings, the establishment of boundaries, and forms of interaction among all members of the educational process (Manjarres Zambrano et al., 2024, p. 69).

It should be noted that within the cooperation of educational environments, tensions and conflicts arise that make it difficult to establish social relationships and achieve educational outcomes. As research shows, teachers express reservations primarily about parents' active involvement in classroom activities. Some teachers feel undervalued or even ignored (Mikler-Chwastek, 2024, p. 124). Difficulties in cooperation between family and school are also evident in relation to sociodemographic and cultural factors, parenting styles, the organization of school work or parental and teacher attitudes (2022, pp. 33–34). The formalized nature of schooling fosters the creation of barriers to contact between parents and teachers, which in turn results in an unsatisfactory level of cooperation (Wanat, 2010, p. 182). Overcoming these difficulties requires effort and commitment on the part of parents and teachers.

Referring these assumptions to the concept of interpersonal closeness, several implications can be identified for developing interpersonal closeness in the school–family relationship. Closeness is a category of considerable importance for the development of social relations. In societies marked by the effects of social isolation, the dangers of war and excessive individualism, closeness emerges as a phenomenon that facilitates the building of relationships necessary for cooperation. This has particular relevance in education, especially in the cooperation of educational environments. Building closeness between family and school is a fundamental tenet of contemporary models of education. Emphasizing the role of closeness in educational relations opens and expands the scope of cooperation.

Closeness is a sensitive and fragile category; therefore, it must be cultivated with care, empathy, and respect for the other person's sensitivity. It is necessary to provide an axiological basis for the category of closeness. Appeals to love for the other person, respect for their dignity, seeking the good, and building on truth are important elements of interpersonal closeness. In family–school cooperation, the axiological dimension of closeness is expressed, among other ways, through high-quality interpersonal communication. Adjusting one's words to the circumstances and, above all, taking into account the dignity of the addressee serve as safeguards against abuse. From these axiological assumptions follows the need to recognize and respect boundaries within closeness. These boundaries protect the well-being of parents and teachers alike, making their clear definition and observance essential. Such boundaries help ensure that the dignity of parents, students, and teachers is not violated.

Closeness is a complex category, so it requires multifaceted efforts—not only because of the participants involved, but also because of the methods used. Therefore, a pedagogy of closeness is needed, as it may show how to build closeness in educational relationships. The pedagogy of closeness includes practical measures for establishing and strengthening social relationships. Closeness understood as a pedagogical category implies that, in family–school relations, it is necessary to take intentional actions aimed at what unites people. This does not mean overlooking difficult issues that may divide them. The pedagogy of interpersonal closeness takes into account a wide spectrum of educational concerns, emphasizing the importance of current and potential areas of cooperation, which aims to resolve complex educational situations.

Adopting the concept of a pedagogy of closeness in education implies the need for mutual learning between parents and teachers. In this sense, educators of interpersonal closeness are needed. They may be parents, teachers, or students. Teachers of closeness are those who build educational authority based on an attitude of openness, readiness to cooperate, and commitment. The pedagogy of closeness does not assign a formal meaning to the term “closeness teacher,” so it can apply equally to teachers of children and adolescents. In this context, it is necessary

to highlight good examples of relationship-building between educational environments. Good practices in this area help model the behavior of participants in the educational process.

The use of methodologies for building interpersonal closeness is also needed. The selection and use of appropriate methods facilitate the implementation of the principles of interpersonal closeness in educational practice. The methodology of interpersonal closeness is expressed in actions taken mainly by teachers. Their initiatives, such as organizing meetings for parents and students, maintaining contact between stakeholders, and creating opportunities for parents to be involved in school activities, practically express the idea of interpersonal closeness. Parents' responses to the school's initiatives should not be understood as passive acceptance of suggested forms of cooperation but rather as conscious efforts to build relationships that lead to satisfying collaboration and, above all, support the child's education.

When considering the educational dimension of interpersonal closeness, it is worth recalling its etymological meaning. Building closeness between people requires an effort to overcome the impediments inherent in relationships. It is necessary to take into account situations in which closeness is rebuilt after earlier violations of interpersonal relations, closeness created from "scars" that recall what was once a painful wound. Closeness requires openness toward the other person, and sometimes forgiveness and reconciliation. This is particularly important to remember in family–school relations, because acknowledging this assumption justifies making further attempts to establish closeness and motivates efforts to rebuild it.

## Conclusion

The relationship between family and school, understood as educational environments and analyzed in the context of interpersonal closeness, reveals the need to reconsider social relationships in the educational process. Interpersonal closeness based on trust, empathy, and recognition

of dignity can act as a key to understanding the dynamics of educational cooperation. The analyses confirm that the pedagogical category of closeness integrates the emotional, axiological, and structural dimensions of the educational process, becoming a tool for building coherent bonds among parents, teachers, and students. Introducing a pedagogy of closeness into educational practice requires both the development of relational competencies and the creation of supportive organizational and ethical conditions. This approach opens new research and practical perspectives, allowing us to understand education as a process of growing together in relationship.

Based on the research conducted, the following recommendations for educational practice can be made:

1. Interpersonal closeness should be treated as an important pedagogical category that contributes to the educational process and cooperation between educational environments.
2. The relational competencies of teachers and parents—such as empathy, communication, and active listening—should be developed through training and professional practice.
3. Cooperation between family and school requires clearly defined rules, roles, and boundaries that ensure a balance between closeness and the autonomy of participants.
4. The pedagogy of closeness should be reflected in school culture, rituals, communication practices, and everyday interactions.
5. Further empirical research on the functions and effects of closeness in education is needed, especially in the context of social change and digital communication.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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