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Current Trends in Early Pedagogy

Early school education deals with the process of teaching and educating children of school age, and functions within the broad mainstream of the contemporary humanities. For many years it was identified mainly with the process of teaching and educating in grades I–III of primary school; this kind of methodical preparation of teachers was supposed to lead to the achievement of effects described in various programmes and manuals. The process of teaching and learning had previously been based on assumptions of behaviourism and was supposed to lead to specific, detailed outcomes reflected in the behaviour of students. This situation has gradually and consistently been altered by various conditions, some of which have arisen from developments in science, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, pedagogy, and didactics, but also because of social and political influences. Pedagogy, as well as early pedagogy, "is both a sub-field of the educational sciences, as well as activities carried out in schools (…), so it is expressed in this language (scientific – theoretical, advisory – methodical, educational) and in social practices." (Klus-Stańska, Szczepska, 2009, p. 26–27). Therefore, the education of early school age children should now be perceived in a versatile, complex, multi-function way, taking into account multiple intersecting factors.

Determinants and directions of early school education

The most important determinants of changes in the area of early school education should include:

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✔ The process of reforming school education in Poland:

- reducing the compulsory school age (this is being implemented, although it was again recently delayed for another two years until 2014 – this has resulted in an interesting situation for the present five-year old children who are currently doing a year of a mandatory preparation for the school in kindergarten, but do not know what they will do the following year if their parents decide not to send their children to school. If they repeat the same year, will it be beneficial for their future learning? This is a repeat of the situation in 2009 when the new core curriculum was introduced, when all seven-year olds in large part repeated the first-class programme that had been taught in the previous year in class zero, (Komorowska, 2011, p. 46–51);
- increasing the availability and popularisation of children's early education – this concerns mainly legislation and designing programmes that aim to popularize preschool education, especially in rural areas; and linking early school education with preschool education;
- introducing integrated education and a descriptive evaluation at the stage of early school education;
- paying attention to the integration of teaching and education processes, which would entail restoring the properly understood educational function of the school;
- operationalisation of objectives and their reorientation. Under the influence of paradigmatic transformations, the hierarchy of values, which are the source of the early learning goals, has changed. Earlier, the priorities were: messages, then skills and values. Today, the formation of personality is the first priority (with special emphasis placed on attitudes), followed by skills and lastly the message. With this hierarchy, an entity should have the ability to attain self-fulfilment, intellectual autonomy, and should be open and creative. We help a child to learn about himself and his own abilities. We pay attention to his abilities, aspi-

rations and the implementation of the goals that have been set. (Karbowniczek, 2011, p. 215);

- developing a new core curriculum; introducing compulsory computer classes and English language teaching as early as class I;
- the possibility to construct the authors' own teaching programmes based on a core curriculum;
- learning and working at school, which is run in the form of play;
- increasing the autonomy of the teacher in the framework of the programmes and handbooks choice (decentralisation), introducing innovations and authors' solutions;
- in-depth diagnosis and the monitoring of pupils;
- multiculturalism and bilingualism of children;
- systematic work with a child of special educational needs: including those who are outstandingly talented, or those who are exhibiting difficulties or who are handicapped;
- innovative activities of teachers in early school education;
- changes in the education system and the vocational training of teachers;

✔ a change of perspective on the relationship between teacher and students – which would focus on the two-party, master – pupil dialogue; this would involve parents in the education process (the education of parents, opening the school to the local community; school autonomy and care for the formation of its identity);

✔ socio-economic transformations and globalization processes in the country, which have an important influence on the lives of people, their needs, expectations, hierarchy of values, aspirations, and, at the same time, they determine the formulation of new aims:

- changing family patterns from those that are large and multi-generational, to those that are small, often with one child, often broken, with the child being raised in non-legalised relationships or mixed families that are multicultural. This requires the inclusion

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within the pedagogical discourse of such conceptual categories as euro-orphanhood, multiculturalism, education in the border areas, or paying more attention to the value of families in the education process;

- lack of authority or their erroneous perception, with no fixed points of reference in the world of values, the relativism of values, and their selective treatment, which means that children raised in such an atmosphere have important gaps in their understanding of value, in determining what is right and wrong, and their role-models are the heroes of computer games or television cartoons. These are often negative characters from the point of view of education, which show a child relationships based on violence and the characters possess the attribute of having "many lives". This situation requires special consideration of how children are introduced to the world of values, what kind of reality they are shown in this regard, what reading to select and how to proceed in order to be attractive and credible when promoting those concepts that are not promoted by the colourful and ubiquitous media;
- threats to civilization, which reveal a number of pathologies, including the lowering of the age of alcohol, nicotine, drugs and sex initiation. The promotion of a lifestyle based on "simple happiness" and physical attractiveness, and omnipresent permissiveness which ensures that it is "unsurprising" that a 7-year-old girl has painted nails and is wearing a very short skirt made by a fashionable brand, and who is aware of her attractiveness. This situation requires consideration of the aims of education, the integration of preventative activities at the very beginning of the education of children (even in kindergarten, for example, there is a prevention programme called "Friends of Zippy");
- the requirements of the information society; the rapid development of technology, which, on the one hand creates opportunities for child development (at the Ministry of Education level there are projects being implemented such as: "Interclass" or

"Digital school", computer classes are introduced from the first-class), but on the other hand, this poses a significant threat to all areas of child development. Special attention deserves to be paid to the proper care of the linguistic development of a child. The ability of students to express themselves in the era of "cells and computers" is truncated, poor, grammatically incorrect; written statements contain a lot of spelling mistakes; there is a reluctance to read books; and children lack the skills of dialogue. There is an important role for teachers to create situations that enable interaction, and entering into dialogues (especially because children have poor experience in terms of communicating with others, because the contemporary family is determined by television – by J. Izdebska);

✔ negative social opinions about the reform of public education, about the school itself, which is not prepared for change, and about teachers who cannot cope with teaching – this creates educational problems, as children to not respect their authority. This causes dissatisfaction and opposition towards school education, and leads to the promotion of home education (home schooling is popular in the UK, and is gaining more and more followers in Poland), (for more on this subject see: Budajczak, 2004). There are doubts about the validity of this solution in an era in which it is difficult to find stability in a world of values and authorities; and there is certainly a need to develop such guidelines for home education, which would give chil dren an opportunity, rather than just addressing the needs of parents. Besides, it is difficult to understand the admiration for home schooling whilst also promoting early school education.

The above list shows the number of changes in many areas of people's lives, which have a significant impact on a child's education. They determine the trends in contemporary pedagogy, including early school pedagogy in both theoretical and practical terms.

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Didactic aspects of early school education

The authors of the reform agreed that the optimal concept of teaching and education in classes I-III is that of an integrated-holistic education, which is conducive to the harmonious and comprehensive development of a child's personality. Accordingly, in the early school education programme we read "the aim of early school education is to support a child in his intellectual, emotional, social, ethical, physical, and aesthetic development. It is important to educate a child in such a way as to prepare him to live in harmony with himself, people, and nature. It should be ensured that a child can distinguish between good and evil, is aware of social belonging (to family, peer group and national unity) and understands the need to care for the environment. At the same time, people should seek to shape the system of knowledge and skills necessary for a child to explore and understand the world, coping with everyday situations and to continue their education in classes IV–VI of primary school".

In the context of the above, it is heartening to see the awareness of the importance of preschool and early education, which is called the "golden age of a child's development". "There is particular emphasis on the fact that a child's experiences in the early school period have a significant impact not only on the development of the student's school career, but are an important foundation for his comprehensive development. Therefore, early school pedagogy promotes a departure from the old behaviourist model of education in favour of one that emphasises the benefit of constructing knowledge by students, and which teaches cognitive independence. The transition from the domination of teaching to that of the benefit of learning through children's own activities and experience of the world is an important issue in current educational discourse. The modern school has to "create situations in which the student constructs his knowledge through self-activity, and not only captures, preserves, and restores the information provided by the teacher's skills." (Michalak, Misiorna, 2004, p. 70).

The task of the teacher is to stimulate students, creating the right environment and opportunities for discovering the surrounding world,

acquiring skills by using their experience and knowledge. "In the modern concepts of integrated education, treating children very subjectively, special emphasis is placed on developing their own multilateral activity. The intention is to make a student formulate and experience problems in real situations, so that the emerging questions, doubts and dilemmas can be addressed through activity, creating, and experimenting". (Just, 2005, p. 35). The individual's own activity is thus a basic condition of cognitive development.

In the process of constructing knowledge by children, interactions with adults are particularly important. "Every kind of knowledge constructed by students requires them to confront objects and people. Interactions with others often lead to a confrontation between their own way of thinking and understanding (…)". (Michalak, 2004, p. 185). Two subjective dialogues between a teacher and student provide an opportunity to feel the sense of being someone important in this relationship, which allows a child to develop adequate self-esteem and at the same time motivates the child to take further actions and share the effects of these actions with others, which stimulates a child's curiosity towards new issues and methods for their interpretation.

Individualisation is also important in the processes of a child's teaching and learning. It gains special importance in the process of implementing changes connected with the reform, which leads to the combining of classes, not only of children with varying intellectual levels but also those of different biological ages (this fact is a consequence of the on-going process of lowering the mandatory school age and the beginning of school education for children of 6 and 7 years in the last 3 years). Moreover, in light of H. Gardner's widely discussed elementary theory of multiple intelligences, which is the basis of education, every child develops their knowledge and responsibility for their experience, because man has at least eight forms of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily – kinesthetic, musical, visual – spatial, interpersonal, natural (Marek, 2006). They should all be accounted for and developed in the teaching process.

At the beginning the profile of intelligence of each child in the classroom should be determined; in the case of younger children by this

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should be achieved mainly through observation. Secondly, teaching material should be presented in different ways to create the conditions for effective learning and teaching (various activities in the class). Third, the choice of the teaching methods and learning should be made according to the profile of intelligence and dominance of each child. And finally, classrooms should be decorated in such a way as to ensure that the children find within them a place to ensure multi-intelligent functioning (areas of interest); parents should also be familiarised with the child's intelligence profile in order that they can organize surroundings outside the school according to it. Profiling multiple intelligences of a child should indicate to teachers, parents and carers, what types of activities a child should be provided at home, school and during extracurricular activities. And it is not only about the strengths of the child, but also about stimulating the weaker attributes at this stage of development. By knowing the profile of a child's intelligence, teachers and parents should translate this into a way of planning his education and assessment. At the beginning of the school path it is important not to let the school mark or assessment demotivate the child; it should provide feedback related to student achievement in various areas of school life. In the light of existing legislation, evaluation in classes I–III has a descriptive character that excludes assessment through the use of giving marks in the form of numbers. However, as shown by numerous studies and observations, early school education teachers often use a digital evaluation or, when refraining from using them, they use points, percentages, or conventional signs – symbols (such as smiley faces, clouds, sun, or the letters A to D, where A is the highest degree of mastery of a specific message or skill and D the lowest), which are interpreted and translated for children and parents in terms of valuation. Teachers explain this fact by pointing to the expectations from parents and students regarding digital evaluation, which can be more easily understood. This fact, however, disturbs the whole concept of reforming early school education in the school. A student receiving a digital evaluation finds out the extent to which his work is similar or deviates from the ideal. For a correct understanding of children's learning descriptive assessment should be used, which gives in-

formation about both what the child knows, how and about what the child should work on, what needs to be improved, and how the child can learn. A special account in the assessment process of the youngest pupils (next to the evaluation summation report – which is a summary of knowledge of the topic – deserves formative assessment), is based on feedback, which takes into consideration what the student did well, as well as what should be done differently, and which direction to choose in further studies. (Hyżak 2008, p. 78). It has the form of a commentary on the student's work. Formative assessment is this kind of assessment, which helps the student to learn. A student needs both, information about the degree to which he has mastered the material, as well as what he needs to improve upon and how he should achieve this. Therefore, teachers should still give signs, stamps, smiles, and those other forms that are used to "replace" digital evaluation, but one should also develop a plan of merger, or perhaps separation of these two methods of assessment (formative and summary) which would serve the student and his learning process.

For formative assessment parents must also be convinced; they should be made aware of the benefits of formative assessment as a factor that supports their children's education. As a result of the feedback, which accompanies formative assessment, parents also learn what their child has correctly completed, and what went wrong and how it should be improved. They also get tips on how to help their children and how they can support them in their learning. It is worth making the parents conscious of the fact that children do not go to school to receive a "number", but to learn something, such as a skill or to solve a problem. It is worth asking a student coming back from school: What did you learn today? What new experience did you have? What did you understand? Instead of: What grade did you receive today? (Hyżak 2008, p. 79).

To sum up the above presented description of the main reasons for learning and teaching, we can quote Bożena Muchacka, when she says that "a good education will help a child's development; a student's innate intellectual dispositions should be especially supported by a number of factors, including:

– intellectual and developmental goal-setting (e.g. stimulating cognitive activity), developing cause-effect thinking skills (presenting a hypothesis), predicting, developing skills of critical, analytical and synthetic thinking, developing attitudes to learning, research, communication,

– cooperation and collaboration (in mutual interactions: children, teachers, parents),

– consideration of the forms and functions of learning, depending on the needs of the child,

– consideration of forms and functions of learning, depending on the development process".

(Muchacka, 2010, p. 85–86)

Projected directions of further changes in early school education

In terms of the theoretical aspects of early education in the future we can expect:

– the emergence of new orientations, directions and currents within the humanities,

– an emphasis on the role of subjectivity in this plenipotence, which is the highest stage of subjectivity,

– an increase in the amount of qualitative research relating to teaching and education of children at an early school age,

– a critical review (positive and negative) concerning the implementation of the concept of integrated education in grades I–III.

In terms practice, we can expect:

– more reliable and detailed work with children with special educational needs (both weak and capable),

– multi-dimensional development of the concept of integrated education in schools,

– improvement in the quality of multilateral education of children,

– the addition of a new practical-teaching solution,

– the triggering of new teacher initiatives, which will boost creative activity,

– an approximation of the educational process to the standards of a democratic open society,

– a search for unconventional methodological solutions,

– the effective implementation of the pedagogisation of parents to schools.

To summarize: contemporary trends in early school pedagogy are largely a response to the question: what are the expectations and challenges faced by modern education. The complexity of the factors that determine the shape of modern education and an awareness of the importance of early education for children's development, and the further education route caused by modern early school pedagogy, has to cope with many directions of research, with the need to redefine some of the concepts and processes and the continuous search for the most optimal ways of achieving the objectives of early school education. This will prove to be a major challenge for teachers at this stage of education, who are required to change their habits when it comes to the ways of teaching and organising the learning process, re-evaluating knowledge and skills, as well as to be creative and innovative in the implementation of various educational strategies.

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Abstract

A child's education at an early school age is a major challenge, both at the individual and society levels. Its present shape is conditioned by, on the one hand, the development of science, especially psychology, pedagogy and didactics; on the other hand, by the changing socio-cultural, political and economic

reality. These changes have established new trends in early school pedagogy. The article includes the process of reforming the school in terms of elementary education, the role and place of the teacher and student in the learning process, the objectives of early school education, the comprehensive development of the student, his activation and evaluation.

Keywords: early education, school reform, comprehensive development of student, child teaching and learning, assessment in early school education

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