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The Power of Words – An Example of Action Supporting Children’s Self-Esteem

Abstract

The article describes the issue of positive psychology and its application to education, as well as concepts such as well-being and quality of life. Attention was paid to self-esteem and the role of adults in building self-esteem in children. The organization of the study is described, and the self-esteem-supporting activities used at the one of the preschool and school institution in Białystok.

Keywords: positive psychology, self-esteem, early education.

Słowa mają moc – przykład działania wspierającego poczucie własnej wartości dzieci

Abstrakt

W artykule opisano zagadnienie psychologii pozytywnej oraz jej zastosowania w edukacji, a także pojęcia takie jak dobrostan i jakość życia. Zwrócono uwagę na poczucie własnej wartości oraz rolę dorosłych w budowaniu poczucia wartości u dzieci. Opisano organizację badań oraz zaprezentowano działania wspierające poczucie własnej wartości stosowane w jednej z białostockich placówek.

Słowa kluczowe: psychologia pozytywna, poczucie własnej wartości, wczesna edukacja.

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Introduction

Punishments, prohibitions, excessive demands, discipline, reprimands – these are examples of practices that are part of the oppressive cultural discourse of childhood. Such actions negatively affect children's experiences and development. I think a well-known practice is also the student record book, where the teachers posted negative comments about children's behavior; disruption in class, lack of involvement in class, failure to complete homework. What about writing positively about a child's behavior? Words have power – it is a slogan that reflects the essence of the supportive activities in one of the Białystok educational institutions that will be presented in this article. In addition, the substance of the impact of positive feedback on the development of the child will also be presented.

Review of the literature on positive psychology

To begin with, it is worth mentioning positive psychology, which was initiated by Martin Seligman. Positive psychology is a proposal for a new view of the human being, which aims to recognize and develop the best human capabilities (Trzebińska 2008: 13). In this article, the application of elements of positive psychology to education will be of particular interest. Therefore, in order to explain what positive education is, Seligman asks parents two questions – to say in a few words what they most want for their children, and what they think the school is currently giving their children (Seligman et al. 2009). In answering the first question, parents emphasized that they want happiness, contentment, balance, health, life satisfaction and self-confidence for their children. These are all elements related to well-being. Responses to the second question focused on what is related to knowledge and achievement, i.e. thinking ability, success, skills in math, literature (Seligman et al. 2009). This is why positive education is worth considering. It does not invalidate the educational model based on constructing knowledge, acquiring skills, but complements and enriches it with knowledge related to quality of life and well-being (Kwiatek, Bajer 2014).

In positive psychology, there are concepts of quality of life and well-being, which are almost identical. However, when it comes to quality of life, a range of external factors that make up someone's life situation are usually taken into account. Well-being, on the other hand, boils down to an overall assessment of the situation, taking into account an evaluation of a person's mental state and characteristics (Trzebińska 2008). By achieving a high level of well-being and a high level of quality of life, one can speak of a truly good life (King 2001). One of the determinants of a good quality of life, in addition to biological and demographic factors, are psychological factors. Mental qualities are acquired under the influence of life experiences (Seligman 2000) and are considered crucial to well-being. On the one hand, they make the individual self-reliant and responsible for the quality of his or her life, and on the other hand, they are decisive

regarding how he or she will use his or her biological and social capabilities (Trzebińska 2008). The prerequisites for a high quality of life include various psychological phenomena, including a sense of meaning, a sense of self-efficacy, a sense of self-control, and a sense of worth. In my article, I would particularly like to focus on self-esteem. People with high self-esteem believe in their abilities, are able to cope better with difficult situations (Zbonikowski 2011), as well as believe in their abilities and are able to work longer on a task, achieving better results compared to those with low self-esteem (Dyrda 2005; Seligman 1997). In addition, high self-esteem is sometimes equated with the very well-being described earlier (Trzebińska 2008). Positive psychology is focused on the search for a person's strengths (Kolber 2014) and proposes a new view of the human being that aims to recognize and develop his or her best capabilities (Trzebińska 2008). Such activities on educational grounds can be undertaken by teachers, and in the family environment by parents. In the process of raising a child, an important role is played by shaping the child's personality, supporting psychological development and building self-esteem (Giers, Giers 2017).

This is extremely important, since children's self-esteem begins to form as early as the preschool period (Jędrzejewska 2016). Consistent and coherent interactions between parents and teachers enable the construction, development and consolidation of a child's correct worldview (Jędrzejewska 2016). Frequent successes, positive information about the child from parents and teachers influence the formation of a child's high self-esteem, which is an extremely valuable capital for the future, increasing the ability to cope with setbacks (Oleś 2003). Building self-esteem is influenced by two factors. The first is when the child feels that the most important people in his life notice and accept them, and the second is when their feelings and experiences are accepted and understood, and when the child receives feedback that is consistent with their needs (Juul 2011). It is worth remembering that self-esteem comes largely from outside, especially when applied to children of younger school age (Uszyńska-Jarmoc 2007; Grabowiec 2011). Examples of actions that shape a child's unrealistic self-esteem include a lack of appropriate feedback, a focus on the child's weaknesses, as well as an inadequate system of punishment and rewards (Appelt 2005).

Bearing in mind that childhood is a kind of scaffolding on which adult life rests, it is worth trying to ensure that the actions directed toward the child are positive experiences (Kacprzak 2020). The topic described in this article is noteworthy because supporting children's self-esteem is one of the more neglected areas of education (Uszyńska-Jarmoc 2007). It is also worth citing the results of studies that have shown that the stability of self-esteem is at a low level in a group of children of preschool age and younger school age, and that vulnerability to external influences is then particularly high (Robbins, Trzeźniewski 2005). It is for this reason that childhood is the best time to support the building of self-perception and self-esteem. Consequently, if children receive negative messages, information and evaluations from adults, their self-esteem declines. The formation of proper self-esteem in children is fostered by,

among other things, giving them positive messages, reinforcing positive qualities, praising them and avoiding pointing out flaws and mistakes (Ryś 2011).

In conclusion, based on a review of the literature and the results of existing studies, it can be said that indeed words have power and are particularly important in early childhood, when the child considers the self-perception of significant people, namely parents and teachers, to be crucial. A child's self-perception largely depends on these persons, and with that self-perception the child goes through the next stages of his or her life.

Organization of the research

The object of the research of the present study was to find out how to support the personal development and sense of value of children in one of Białystok's educational institutions. The purpose of the research was to learn about the agenda – a tool for supporting children's personal development and sense of value used in a Białystok institution, and to determine how the use of the agenda can contribute to building children's sense of value. To obtain information on the above topics, focus interviews were conducted with children attending the facility, interviews with parents and an interview with the institution's management. The institution's website was also analyzed. The research was conducted in 2022 at the Białystok institution. Thirty children between the ages of five and nine attending the institution, parents and facility management participated in the research.

Agenda – an ordinary yet unusual notebook. Presenting the results of the study

The opposite of a typical student record book with negative entries about a child's behavior is a notebook with positive entries, the so-called agenda – a tool used in one of Białystok's institutions. It is worth starting with what the agenda looks like – it is a red notebook, a planner, divided into the days of the week and room for entries. At the beginning of the agenda is an entry “from itself,” which reads as follows:

I am your diary and I perform an extremely important function. My purpose is to strengthen and enrich the bond between the kindergarten/school and your family home. I will bring important information to your home. Record homework and important information and events in my pages. Parents should also write down in me your important achievements and what you have improved recently or information they want to be passed on to the Teacher. Since I have to make it to the end of the school year in good shape, PLEASE take care of me! I don't ever want to lie abandoned somewhere in a dark corner or be left in a kindergarten/school overnight! So let's make

friends and go through this new school year together, day by day. Warm greetings to you, your Agenda!

Analyzing the institution's website, one can learn that the agenda is a unique educational tool for motivating children to work on themselves and develop in various spheres. The use of the agenda is based on positive reinforcement of the child's behavior and decisions, as well as strengthening self-esteem and self-efficacy. In addition, it also has an educational and organizational function, and parents and teachers are involved in its fulfillment. Additional information about the agenda was provided by the management of the Bialystok facility, saying that it is an informational and motivational tool. The agenda includes entries on what happened during the day and what events will take place in the near future. Teachers and parents write positive messages and praise for the children's behavior every day and read them to the children at pre-school/school and at home. Entries can be in various forms, such as stickers, stamps or a verbal message. Reading the entries gives space to talk with the child about what happened. The child can talk about situations that were related to the entries.

Children attending the Bialystok facility were asked what the agenda is. Their answers are as follows:

[An agenda] is a thing where you write different things. It's a notebook that has everything in it.

A diary where there is school duty, homework, good behavior. A notebook where teachers and parents write what we did best.

From the children's answers, it can be concluded that the agenda is the thing that accompanies them every day and is the link between home and kindergarten/school. It contains information about what is currently happening, what homework is due and positive messages about the child's behavior.

Children were also asked what entries are on their agendas. The answers to this question can be divided into several categories. The first category is entries from parents regarding children's participation in the daily life of the family, as indicated by the following statements:

About responsibilities.

That I helped take care of my brother.

That I cleaned my room.

That I helped make winter tea.

That I helped water the flowers.

By appreciating children's involvement in daily activities, parents show them that their help was important to them. In addition, children can learn to perform various duties. The second group of entries is information from teachers about the child's functioning during the day at the school facility. Here are examples of children's responses:

That I was active in class.

That I do my homework very well.

That I help the teacher with various things and she can always count on me.

That I worked nicely on artwork.

That I helped a classmate.

In addition to the parents, the teacher is the child's third significant person who spends several hours with the child each day. By noticing the child's activities in different areas, the child can feel important and distinguished within their group or class. What is more, it is not singling out or favoring one child, because every child gets positive information, so every child can feel important in their small community. Another group of responses are entries about children's achievements in various areas:

What they did best. About reading well.

That I overcame a fear.

That I was brave at the doctor's.

That I got ready for kindergarten efficiently.

An adult, by letting a child know that he or she has successfully overcome a fear, also builds a sense of the child's ability to cope with the difficulties that arise in his or her life. Recognition of such achievements is often lacking in the process of education, and certainly in some cases such achievements can be far more significant than another high grade on a test.

The best summary of the agenda entries is the statement of one of the children, who said that the agendas contain "Important things about us." The child's response may indicate that he or she is aware of the importance of the entries and sees them as important.

Another question asked to the children was how the children feel when positive entries from the agendas are read to them. The answers are as follows:

Good, because someone appreciated us.

Cool, because we can learn what others see in us.

I feel proud of myself.

I like it when you read and write to me what good things I have done.

The Agenda encourages me to do all sorts of good things, because I like when the teachers read nice things about me.

I like the Agenda because when I do something good, a parent can write praise, and the teacher can read it for the whole class and give praise too.

From the children's responses, it can be concluded that positive entries about themselves make the children feel really important and proud of themselves. Appreciation of children's activities gives them the message that what they do is important and necessary, regardless of the type of activity or achievement, and shows them how they are perceived by those closest to them. In addition, positive messages from teachers and parents encourage children to do positive things. Parents of children attending Bialystok facility speak favorably about the agendas, as evidenced by the following statements:

Agendas are a great tool for looking for the good in a child. Deficiencies in behavior come to mind automatically, and good behavior requires some reflection. This is work that we parents have to put in every day. An effort that pays off. It builds the self-confidence of our children.

In addition to its educational value, the agenda also serves as a kind of journal of small steps leading to the development of important skills needed in adult life.

We can see children's actions in simple activities, such as closing the door when it's cold, even though no one asked them to do so.

From the parents' responses, it can be inferred that by using the agenda, they see strengths in their children and look for the good in them, even in the smallest activities, although this is not easy, as it is often easier to see the negatives. Still, parents emphasize that using the agenda and providing positive messages to children builds their self-confidence, which will certainly pay off in the future.

The management was asked how the use of the agenda can support children's personal development and their sense of self-worth. I think the ideal answer to this question is the following words of the school management:

Children develop on their own terms, constantly having a sense of success, that something is working out for them in life.

Appreciating the child in different areas of activity, even the smallest ones, makes children feel important, that they can do something well, and that what they do can be appreciated. The agenda is a collection of positive information about the child, and entries read in front of the whole group or class make children feel important and appreciated in the environment in which they function, as confirmed by the words of the management:

Children feel important in the space of the community in which they function.

The agenda is a source of positive information about the child. The collection of agendas from each year of education in the future will serve as a souvenir for children, which is an added value. By going back in their memories to their early years, they will be able to see how much good they have already done in life and how many positive qualities they possess.

Summary

The messages a child listens to from an early age contribute to the formation of their vision of the world and themselves. Adult feedback plays a key role in developing a child's self-esteem (Kiełańska 2000; Lewandowska-Kidoń et al. 2009; Biernat 2016). Undoubtedly, the activities used in the Białystok facility promote the formation of positive self-esteem and self-perception. The teacher is a person who spends a lot of time with the child during the day, observing their actions, creations, motivating their work, and has a great opportunity to get to know the child as well as possible. By appreciating their actions, the teacher gives the child the message that what they are doing is important. In addition, it also brings attention to the child's in-

dividual abilities and capabilities, so that they can also discover their strengths. One of the qualities that Irena Obuchowska (2011) attributes to a dream school is that the school should teach to see the good sides of people. Certainly, such activities are embedded in the idea of the Białystok school and thus practiced by the teachers who work there. A high sense of self-esteem builds a person's sense of well-being, which consequently also affects the quality of his or her life.

Based on the research conducted, one may be inclined to conclude that the use of positive reinforcement is a good form of shaping child development. Given the susceptibility of children in early childhood to messages coming from outside, especially from key people such as parents and teachers, the use of positive messages is an important part of child development. By providing children with positive messages regarding their activities, actions and behavior, adults influence their self-esteem, which will bear positive fruit in subsequent stages of their lives. The actions used in the Białystok institution are certainly a model of good practice and can be an inspiration for the introduction of similar actions in other educational facilities.

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