

(Post)pandemic challenges in pedagogical and psychological work with children and youth

Postpandemiczne wyzwania w pracy pedagogiczno-psychologicznej z dziećmi i młodzieżą

DOI 10.25951/12958

Introduction

The end of 2019 was a special moment in the history of mankind, since it was then that the first cases of infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus were confirmed, which meant that a few months later citizens of almost the entire world had to change their current functioning to a large extent and face the largest epidemic in years.

In March 2020, a decision was made in Poland to introduce the state of epidemic threat, which necessitated almost a complete transition to a remote mode of functioning in the field of both education of children and youth and professional work of adults. The existing rules of life, everyday contacts, education, and work changed due to Poles being locked at home and entering a virtual system of interpersonal contacts. Everyday activity and ways of functioning in various areas of life were completely deprived of the previous routine and the society was forced to massively reorganize their lives and forms of activity undertaken at the family, educational, professional, or social level. It was a completely new experience for the whole society and the effects of this change began to be observed quite quickly, especially in terms of the functioning of children and young people.

This article is of a review nature and its main objective is to analyze the existing studies on the psychosocial effects of the pandemic and the related challenges that the entire education system has faced. For the purposes of the analyses, the problem was posed in the form of questions: What are the consequences of pandemic social isolation for children and youth? What psychopedagogical actions should be taken to minimize the effects of the pandemic in terms of the social functioning of young people?

The target group of the analyzes were children and young people learning remotely during the pandemic. The considerations were also related to the problems and challenges faced by pedagogues, psychologists, crisis interventionists and other people who supported young people in a difficult crisis situation, which was the pandemic, and who will now support them in rebuilding and developing their mental well-being.

The conditions for proper social development of children and youth

When analyzing the effects that children and youth experienced during the pandemic in terms of social functioning, primarily it is worth paying attention to the process of development of this group and the factors that are necessary for this process to run properly.

Following modern psychology, it should be assumed that human development is the resultant of various forces, both biological, being the effect of maturation of the body and social, which in turn are the result of learning under the influence of stimulation flowing from the environment, primarily resulting from interaction with other people. It should be remembered that each person develops in a specific environment (both internal and external) and in a specific context, which will be different for each individual and constructed by them in a situation in which they currently are¹. Considering the issue raised in this study, the social context of human development should be looked at in a special way. Since the life of each of us takes place in various types of institutions, organizations and environments, the aforementioned context consists of our interpersonal relationships with other people, participation in various social groups, belonging to communities as well as being influenced by social institutions². This functioning in diverse social structures is the basic source of socialization, i.e., the socialization of an individual. This is due to socialization that a person's personality is shaped, their values, beliefs and specific patterns of behavior, norms, rules, rights, and obligations accepted in a society are built³.

¹ Compare: A. Brzezińska, *Spółeczna psychologia rozwoju*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2007, pp. 189–199.

² Ibid., p. 203.

³ K. Janus (oprac.), *Słownik pedagogiki i psychologii. Zagadnienia, pojęcia, terminy*, Buchmann Sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2011, p. 264.

The process of socialization is closely linked to the development and change of human personality, which consists of specific features characterizing the individual, such as: "their behavior, way of acting, perceiving and transforming reality, character, temperament, intellect, emotional and volitional properties"⁴. The structure specific to each person is created due to the experiences of the individual during their life, and this happens on the biological basis of life, which are instincts, predispositions, inborn needs and talents⁵. It is extremely important that personality development is a process of exchange between the individual and their environment, which makes it possible to indicate certain planes of the socialization process. Among these planes, institutions play an extremely important role, e.g., school and interactions and activities relating to the relationship between children, learning at school or communicating with peers and friends⁶.

Therefore, when analyzing the process of socializing young people, it should be noted that they learn to function in social roles and take up everyday challenges primarily through relationships and social participation. It is necessary to enter direct interactions with other people in the area of various life events – both individual and group.

As A. Bandura writes, "learning would be extremely tedious (not to mention risky) if people had to rely only on the results of their own actions as a source of information about what to do in the future. Fortunately, people learn most of their behavior by modeling: by observing others the individual develops the view of how new behavior is performed, and then this mentally encoded information serves as guidance for action"⁷. Due to examples, they learn how to approximately act in a situation and thus avoid many unnecessary mistakes⁸.

Thus, by observing the behavior of other people, the individual can draw conclusions on this basis and learn how to behave in specific situations. It should also be remembered that the man as a subject of social relations, taking into account their own needs, tendencies, predispositions, can create cer-

⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

⁵ Compare: J. Juszczak-Rygallo, *Socjalizacja dziecka jako proces kształtowania tożsamości*, „Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce” 2016, No. 4 (42), p. 18, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/viewpdf?id=484558>; K. J. Tillmann, *Teorie socjalizacji. Społeczność, instytucja, upodmiotowienie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2006, p. 8.

⁶ K. J. Tillmann, op. cit., pp. 10–14.

⁷ A. Bandura, *Teoria społecznego uczenia się*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007, pp. 37–38.

⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

tain ways of acting and thus become a co-creator of diverse social contexts and broadly understood culture. This allows the young person to develop and deepen the sense of agency, as well as to learn to bear various consequences of their decisions and to be effective in action. Due to this, it is possible to build proper self-esteem.

However, for the process of socialization and personality development to proceed effectively, direct interpersonal relationships with members of various social environments are necessary – not only the family, but also school, peer groups, or the local environment.

Peers play an extremely important role in the process of social development of young people. The peer group becomes a normative and comparative reference group for the individual, due to which, on the one hand, young people learn to behave in accordance with the requirements in force in an environment, and on the other hand, they can evaluate both themselves and others. Interactions with people of a similar age and biographical situation are one of the important determinants for the development of adolescents and shaping their social competences⁹, which significantly affects the further functioning of a young person in social roles and building their individual identity.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the mental and social health of young people

The last few years, starting from the end of 2019, have been a time of extremely dynamic changes not only in Poland, but also around the world. Polish society had to face a special situation primarily in the years 2020–2021, when everyday activities were subordinated to COVID-19. Changes in the form of the sanitary regime meant that schools operated alternately between stationary, hybrid or remote modes. The successive waves of the pandemic had a very negative impact on the mood of young people, their parents and teachers – uncertainty and fears about everyday life intensified¹⁰.

⁹ M. Kokociński, *Rola grupy rówieśniczej w procesie socjalizacji młodzieży*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Komunikacji i Zarządzania w Poznaniu, Poznań 2011, pp. 58–64.

¹⁰ S. Grzelak, D. Żyro, *Jak wspierać młodzież w niestabilnym świecie? Wyzwania i rekomendacje dla wychowania profilaktyki i ochrony zdrowia psychicznego po trudnych latach 2020–2022*, Instytut Profilaktyki Zintegrowanej, Warszawa 2023, pp. 11–12. Raport-2023-Jak-wspierac-mlodziez-ONLINE_1.pdf (ipzin.org)

The period of the pandemic was a time when the mental condition of young people significantly decreased. Many young people, instead of the vitality characteristic of puberty, began to experience a lack of energy, decrease in motivation, instability, and fears about the future¹¹.

An important problem in terms of mental health of young people during the pandemic was a drop in mood. Young people, during the closure of schools and remote education, indicated the presence of a depressive mood, characterized by the experience of sadness, a sense of loneliness and depression. Young people also began to experience psychosomatic problems more often, such as: difficulty falling asleep, lack of energy, headaches, and abdominal pain. Importantly, the number of young people who changed their lifestyle to anti-health lifestyle increased, which was manifested primarily by a significant reduction in physical activity or fewer hours of sleep due to staying up late at night¹².

The pandemic also resulted in traumatic stress for many people, manifested, among others, by the threat and fear of infection and death, identity disruption resulting from social isolation and a radical change in practices of everyday functioning¹³.

The time of isolation and a very strict sanitary regime has also made the Internet even more important than before. For young people, it has become not only a space for remote education, but also a kind of virtual backyard, where it is difficult to have any supervision, which in turn has translated into increased access of children and youth to a variety of content, as well as an excellent tool for manipulating children, still immature for critical reflection¹⁴.

The enormous increase in the time that young people devoted to using information and communication technologies caused that the digital hygiene of children and youth also deteriorated, which was forced on the one hand by remote learning and on the other – by significantly limiting direct contacts with other people and transferring all relationships almost fully into virtual reality.

As indicated by T. Bilicki, the COVID-19 pandemic is an event that triggered a crisis affecting the mental stability of particularly children and adolescents, because this group does not yet have well-developed mechanisms for

¹¹ Compare: Ibid.

¹² J. Pyżalski, *Zdrowie psychiczne i dobrostan młodych ludzi w czasie pandemii COVID-19 – przegląd najistotniejszych problemów*, „Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, badania, praktyka”, 2021, No. 20 (2), pp. 96–97.

¹³ P. Długosz, *Trauma pandemii COVID-19 w polskim społeczeństwie*, CeDeWu, Warszawa 2021, p. 120.

¹⁴ S. Grzelak, D. Żyro, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

processing crisis situations. The result of the introduced sanitary regime was isolation and lack of peer support, monotony, the need to study and work on school material on their own, as well as being constantly among the household members. And although a crisis is a natural part of everyone's life, it should be remembered that it can be dangerous and lead to mental disorders and the occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder¹⁵ – particularly in individuals with a weaker mental structure remaining without proper mental and social support, including specialist support.

It is worth mentioning here that a natural and at the same time constructive way of adaptation in crisis situations is the individual's search for hope to end a difficult situation. However, using this adaptive mechanism was not easy, because the waves of infections and diseases appearing one after another made it much more difficult to implement positive thinking, and this additionally burdened people in crisis¹⁶.

Undoubtedly, a very complex experience for young people was almost complete (especially during the lockdown) confinement at home, which resulted primarily in the lack of opportunities to meet peers, spend free time with them, develop passions and interests together, and learn to construct patterns of behavior in certain social situations. Mutual influences, which, as indicated earlier, are the basis for building and developing the personality and identity of a young person, were significantly reduced.

The opportunities for students to build a community within the school class were also minimized to a certain extent, which was possible primarily through direct daily contact at school and joint undertaking and implementing tasks related to education.

When analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of children and adolescents, it should be noted that young people have experienced its effects in basically all areas of their psychosocial functioning. A large difficulty in properly supporting young people in this difficult period was probably also the fact that many adults, especially parents and teachers, were not prepared to properly organize care and help children and youth.

¹⁵ T. Bilicki, *Jak pracować z uczniem w kryzysie w czasie pandemii COVID-19?*, in: J. Pyżalski (ed.), *Edukacja w czasach pandemii wirusa COVID-19. Z dystansem o tym, co robimy obecnie jako nauczyciele*, EduAkcja, Warszawa 2020, pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ W. Poleszak, G. Kata, *Czynniki chroniące i czynniki ryzyka w radzeniu sobie z pandemią Covid-19 w środowisku młodzieży szkolnej*, „Kwartalnik Naukowy Fides et Ratio Numer” 2022, No. 4 (52), p. 3.

Psychopedagogical support for students in post-pandemic reality

Difficult and tragic situations are an inseparable part of our lives. We are not able to predict all of them, we cannot prevent all of them, therefore it is so important to skillfully deal with events that may be the source of a crisis.

Undoubtedly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related consequences unknown so far, and thus the need to find oneself in a completely new situation, was a crisis event for the vast majority of society, requiring many supportive actions – not only when the crisis appeared, but also in the context of coping with its long-term effects.

Today, almost all social groups, including teachers, parents, and above all young people, are struggling with the effects of the (post)pandemic crisis. Therefore, it becomes extremely important to construct coherent support systems, especially for young immature people, but also to create conditions for individuals to develop constructive ways of dealing with stressful situations.

A major role in the process of supporting young people should be played by school as an environment we are connected with for many years of our lives and in which we spend at least a few hours every day. For young people, the presence and support provided by people with whom they establish relationships within the school, i.e., peers, tutors, and teachers, is of particular importance in dealing with crisis situations. The presence of a tutor who shows concern, interest and strengthens students' self-confidence can be extremely helpful and significant here¹⁷. Above all, it is them who create conditions in the school class to build integration, mutual respect among students and care for the educational climate. The school should also be a place where young people not only acquire knowledge in various areas, but also develop personal competences through interpersonal relationships, including self-efficacy, necessary in dealing with everyday challenges of the present day. In this context, it becomes extremely important to discuss the current education system towards its change so that it is conducive to building positive self-image, self-esteem and appropriate self-acceptance in children and adolescents.

The so-called first aid in a difficult crisis situation is very often provided to young people by their peers. It is often much easier to trust a person of a similar age who defines the surrounding reality in a similar way. Therefore, in building a system of supporting children and youth, it is worth considering preparing young people to support their friends on a large scale, as well as developing

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

a network of organizations and institutions in which youth leaders would play a significant role in the assistance process. These leaders should be provided with the appropriate level of training in terms of the ability to communicate with peers, respond appropriately to problems perceived in groups of children and youth, solve difficult situations, including through effective referral to specialists.

When analyzing the effects of the pandemic and the need to organize related support, it should be noted that improper family relationships have a significant impact on the deterioration of the mental condition of children and adolescents. It is not only about the occurrence of pathological phenomena in the family, but above all about problems in the field of proper communication and active listening, which are the basis for building trust and strengthening bonds between parents and children¹⁸. This is undoubtedly largely caused by the current lifestyle of modern societies – high concentration on professional work and the resulting overload of parents, greater autonomy of individual family members related to the forms of time management, rapid and comprehensive development of technology resulting in the transfer of some activities to the virtual world.

Thus, analyzing the impact of the family environment on the proper development of the child and shaping their ability to cope with difficult situations, it can be concluded that the greatest support that a young person can receive from the family is unconditional love and acceptance. As a result, some of the most basic human psychological needs are satisfied – the need for security and meaning. It is due to such a relationship that children and adolescents build proper self-esteem and develop constructive coping with challenges, which occurs mainly through modeling and imitating parents¹⁹.

Therefore, it becomes extremely important to support the parents themselves in developing their parenting competences, a specific ability to follow the world of children and youth, sensitive observation and reacting to their emotional states and proper use of the support of specialists in the field of adequate assistance in difficult situations. However, it is necessary here to build a broad support system based on the cooperation of the school, family and organizations, associations and institutions operating for the benefit of the child

¹⁸ A. Wojtczuk, *Pandemia koronawirusa – zmiana w świecie. Zagrożenia dla zdrowia psychicznego i szanse rozwojowe*, „Student Niepełnosprawny. Szkice i Rozprawy” 2020, No. 20 (13), p. 104.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

and family. In this way, it is possible to analyze the sense of quality of life of children and young people permanently and comprehensively and to build an environment conducive to strengthening the mental well-being of young people.

In building the right conditions for the proper functioning of children and youth, it is impossible to ignore the concept of *resilience* today. This concept, based on knowledge in the field of life science, social psychology, developmental psychology, and health science, to a large extent allowed for building strategies that effectively strengthen the protective factors that enrich the individual and environmental resources of young people²⁰. Factors, processes and mechanisms described by the concept of *resilience* are conducive to the positive functioning of the individual despite adversity and traumatic experiences they are struggling with or have struggled in the past²¹. The strategies used within this concept allow young people to develop resilient personalities, which translates into their overall ability to cope with both external and internal stressors flexibly and on the basis of resources²².

However, it should be remembered that the basic condition for building and strengthening individual psychological resources of the individual, enabling dealing with stressful situations and constructing a positive and satisfying life that takes into account the individual, specific needs of each person, is extensively organized support and constant access to specialists – psychologists, psychiatrists, pedagogues, therapists.

Conclusions

In May 2023, the World Health Organization announced the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus also in Poland, from July 1 of that year, the state of epidemic threat was lifted. Over three years of functioning in the system of various sanitary regimes, including almost the complete closure of society at home and limiting all interpersonal contacts to the virtual world, must have brought many negative effects, among others, fear, uncertainty, anxiety faced by the whole society, including many young people who do not yet have

²⁰ B. Borys, *Zasoby zdrowotne w psychice człowieka*, „Forum Medycyny Rodzinnej” 2010, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 49–52.

²¹ K. Jarosz, *Profilaktyka pozytywna w teorii i praktyce pedagogicznej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole 2019, p. 49.

²² A. Falewicz, *Prężność osobowości i jej rola w procesach radzenia sobie ze stresem*, „Studia Koszalińsko-Kołońskie” 2016, No. 23, p. 265.

properly developed skills of rational assessment of the surrounding reality and the ability to cope with situations that trigger individual crises. Therefore, it is necessary to provide support and effective assistance.

The analyzes presented in this publication and the research conducted as part of the “Psychological and pedagogical support program for students and teachers” allowed for the development of important recommendations for building a broad, multidimensional assistance system for children and youth²³.

First of all, it is very important to diagnose stress coping strategies by students, with particular emphasis on strategies in the area of helplessness and avoidance. This should be followed by strengthening young people’s constructive ways of coping with stressful situations, which will allow them to overcome the crises experienced by them. It is important, however, that this should be accompanied by offering systemic support (parents, teachers, peers) addressed especially to students with an increased sense of helplessness²⁴.

Support is also required by the modern parent who, wanting to create the proper environment for the comprehensive development of the child, should be able to develop their parental and educational competences.

A significant element of building an effective support system for children and youth is also providing professional support to teachers. An effective way of supporting pedagogues and developing their psychopedagogical skills in working with children and youth can be systematic supervision. Its aim would be the permanent development of pedagogues, taking into account the reflection on their own attitudes as well as the possibilities and limitations in organizing the process of care and upbringing that is favorable to young people. Supervision would also be an excellent opportunity to exchange experiences, due to which it would be possible to increase effectiveness in the area of carefully perceiving and analyzing the behavior of children and young people and reacting immediately in the event of a threat to their broadly understood well-being.

To sum up, psychopedagogical work in the (post)pandemic reality should be carried out in many ways and take into account the needs, possibilities, resources of both children and youth, as well as adults - tutors, pedagogues, teachers and parents.

²³ Compare: Raport z badań przeprowadzonych wśród młodzieży szkół ponadpodstawowych, Lublin 2021, p. 62, https://pwpp.uksw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Raport-z-badan-przeprowadzonych-wsrod-mlodziezy-szkol-ponadpodstawowych_1.pdf

²⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

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SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic, due to its specificity – especially very strict sanitary regimes – has brought many negative effects in the area of the psychosocial functioning of society, including children and youth, which has translated into a significant deterioration of the mental condition of this social group.

KEYWORDS: (Post)pandemic challenges, pedagogical and psychological work with children and youth

STRESZCZENIE

Pandemia COVID-19, ze względu na swoją specyfikę – zwłaszcza bardzo rygorystyczne reżimy sanitarne – przyniosła wiele negatywnych skutków w obszarze psychospołecznego funkcjonowania społeczeństwa, w tym dzieci i młodzieży, co przełożyło się na znaczne pogorszenie stanu psychicznego tej osoby.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: postpandemiczne wyzwania, praca z dziećmi i młodzieżą