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The Role of Mediation in a Teacher's Work

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Abstract

This article deals with the use of mediation in the educational space of the teacher's work. It discusses the essence of mediation and the contemporary transformations and difficulties that are taking place in school institutions, directly related to the person of the teacher. The quintessence of the considerations is the presentation of mediation in the context of challenges for the teacher, as an alternative method to improve dialogue and alleviate emerging conflicts and misunderstandings especially in teacher-student, teacher-parent, and student-student relations.

Keywords: mediation, school, teacher, student

Introduction

The school is an institution that, right after the home environment, represents one of the most important stages in everyone's life and is thus an area of constant change. It is also a space where various misunderstandings and conflicts occur on many levels. Nevertheless, conflicts are an integral part of everyone's life, so it is impossible to exclude them completely, especially from school life. They are also an indispensable part of social functioning because every person is different, has a different personality, or is characterized by different experiences, so in the face of conflicting individual conditions, misunderstandings are formed in all aspects of life. Therefore, there is a need for the introduction and use of an alternative method to enable constructive resolution of disagreements through mediation.

Furthermore, using this tool, any difficult situation can be used to educate students and develop certain competencies. It is also becoming noticeable that the introduction of mediation activities into the school and peer environment has

many positive effects, not only on the resolution of misunderstandings and prevention of violence, but also significantly improves cognitive and social skills among both students and teachers.

Theoretical foundations of mediation

Mediation is a scientific field that is viewed in various aspects and in connection with which one can find many definitions. The very phrase mediation means to mediate a dispute (Latin: *mediare*) or impartial, middle (Latin: *medius*) (Kalisz, Zienkiewicz, 2009, p. 43).

The Mediator's Code of Ethics defines this process as a voluntary and confidential search for agreement for people who are stuck in a common conflict with the help of an impartial and neutral mediator. The main goal of this mediation is primarily to assist the mediating parties in deciding to bridge the disagreement in a mutually acceptable way (Polish Mediation Center, 2020). Mediation is also a platform that creates conditions for the peaceful resolution of disputes, and especially creates a space for conversation, during which everyone can outline their concerns, needs, or simply express their opinions honestly. This is also due to the fact that mediation is described as a tool for innovative and effective management of conflicts that have occurred, while the role of the mediator himself is to listen to the conflicting parties and direct the conversation in such a way as to lead to the resolution of the dispute, the development of a settlement and a sense of victory by both parties (Jastrzebska, 2014(3), p. 3).

There is also an educative definition of the interpretation of mediation, which is defined as some kind of exchange that takes place between parties having difficulties in their mutual correlations (Swiatkowski, 2012). In the approach discussed above, the mediator's role largely boils down to creating a sense of security in which this exchange can naturally occur. Mediation proceedings are also characterized by a specific approach to conflict because it is seen in the context of something natural, but not negative – it seeks positive change. In view of this, the conflict itself (from Latin *conflictus* – event) is identified with the problem to be solved, which at the same time is the foundation for clearing the situation, relationship and understanding of the other party, including realizing the existence of the conflict and starting to work on it (Morek, 2009, pp. 15–29).

It should also be noted that mediation is systematized in legal norms and is included in the Code of Civil Procedure, Criminal Procedure, or in juvenile cases (this is related to the type of case in which the proceedings are conducted). And in the case of a school institution, mediation is included in the Regulation of the Ministry of Education as an effective tool for psychological and pedagogical assistance (Regulation of the Ministry of Education, 2017, Art. 24, para. 6).

In order to be able to talk about a properly conducted mediation procedure, despite the fact that it is an informal activity, five main principles should be observed, which should be absolutely respected.

The principle of voluntariness manifests itself in the informed and independent consent of the parties to the conflict to participate in the mediation proceedings, as well as the specific person of the mediator. This consent can be changed at any time during the proceedings.

The principle of confidentiality applies to all persons participating in the mediation (the parties to the conflict and the mediator), which guarantees that all information obtained in the course of the activities will not be used in any way.

The principle of acceptability is expressed in the widely understood acceptance of the person of the mediator, as well as the fact that this is a person whose goal is to help level the existing conflict.

The principle of impartiality refers to the equal and uniform treatment of the parties to the conflict by the mediator. In this procedure, each participant has equal rights.

The principle of neutrality means that the mediator does not have the ability to impose solutions on the parties. Any terms of settlement are formulated by the clients, while the mediator only helps to clarify the given solutions, as mediation puts the dexterity in the hands of the conflicting parties (Polish Mediation Center, 2020).

Difficulties in teacher's present work as a challenge for mediation

School is a place where students spend a great deal of time acquiring not only knowledge but also appropriate social behavior and proper interpersonal relations. However, more and more often it is the school that is becoming the point of complex, various conflicts, and misunderstandings. Because over the years there are huge changes taking place in society, related both to changes in the political and political system, but most importantly in the way children and young people behave, parents' expectations of the role of teachers, including a decline in the authority of the teacher through which many disputes arise in the relationship teacher-parent, management-parent, and student-student (Wajerowska-Oniszczyk, 2003(4)).

In the student-student relationship, it is increasingly possible to see an intensifying rivalry between students, which takes the form of negative emotions in the form of jealousy, dislike of the other person, and even hostility, resulting in ridicule, quarrels, and malice. There is also the use of aggression and violence, as well as overtly presented intolerance (due to appearance, origin, or dress) towards the otherness of other students.

Among the currently emerging conflicts in the school space on the teacher-parent line can include inadequate requirements for the tasks of the teacher because due to the emerging problems of care and education, parents (often too busy) require not only that the teacher perform the teaching function, but also the educational function. In addition, they direct all the responsibility for aca-

demographic performance towards teachers. Thus, in the situation of emerging learning difficulties, inappropriate social behavior, or non-acceptance of the required rules, then a double conflict arises between student-student and teacher-parent. This is the reason why more and more often parents do not feel the educational role of their own children, diverting this entirely to the institution of the school, as a result of which there are resentments and conflicts that accumulate on the teacher.

The most noticeable conflict in the management-parent area at the moment is the issue of placing religion (which is an optional subject) in the middle of the lesson plan. This controversial subject is expanding the scale of the conflict, in which many more people are involved. The ground for disagreements arises on the grounds of organizing care or arranging time for students who do not participate in the aforementioned lesson (Kowalczyk, 2021).

Also, at the early elementary and school stages, there are numerous misunderstandings in the teacher-student context because due to what is presented in the home environment regarding the person of the teacher, so very often the child translates it to the school environment. Unfair grading, “the lady is picking on you”, are the most common areas in which conflict arises both in the case of the teacher-student and then the teacher-parent, because observing the growing attitudes of entitlement to the person of the teacher, the parent unscrupulously, “attacks” without knowing the whole truth (Woźniak, 2021).

In view of the above, the planes where conflicts most often occur are listed, and it becomes apparent that the modern teacher not only has a huge amount of top-down duties to fulfill but also faces the challenge of maintaining appropriate relations with the external environment. In addition, the examples cited are also a confirmation of the need for and definition of the space eligible for mediation.

Mediation in the school environment

Two of the most common types of mediation can be distinguished in relation to the educational space. These are school mediation and peer mediation, in which the mediation action is similar, while the difference lies in the party who is involved in the dispute (Ombudsman for Children, 2017, p. 4). The first of these, school mediation, occurs when a disagreement is mitigated by an adult prepared to do so, i.e. with the appropriate competence and knowledge (e.g., management, teacher, educator), and arises on the line of student-student, teacher-student, teacher-parent, management-parent, teacher-teacher, teacher-director. It is also worth noting that this is an important task that falls under the responsibility of the school establishment because, despite everything, mediation with children is much more difficult and demanding than with adults. This is due to the fact that the mediator not only accompanies, helps to resolve a given conflict situation, but also influences the formation of attitudes towards both the conflict

and the possibilities of its mitigation or leveling, which can be used in the future by the student. Therefore, also in this case, the teacher has a real influence on the creation of attitudes of his students.

Peer mediation (less common), on the other hand, occurs when the conflict arose between students, and the role of mediator is played by another student who has been prepared for this activity (thus meeting the relevant criteria such as being over 13 years of age, or characterized by a gentle disposition, responsible, and most importantly – having the appropriate communication skills), but is also assisted by a school mediator. It is used when the cause of the conflict is a difference of opinion on the issue under discussion. This happens when the conversation turns into a conflict of values because neither of the parties can accept the other point of view, being convinced that they are right. This type of mediation definitely makes it easier for young people to open up and discuss the problem, because they have a sense of equality with the mediator, thus the person coordinating the course of the dialogue.

There is no doubt that the school and especially the person of the teacher, for it is largely with him that the school period is identified, should meet the emerging difficulties, conflicts, and helplessness that affect students and their home environments. It should be shown that conflicts can be resolved, but in a different way from what students are currently doing. Aggression and violence are an unconstructive approach to the problem. The method used by schools, on the other hand, is to put the issue in the hands of the “school referee”, who is usually the headmaster or a teacher. His role boils down to asking “what happened?” and “who started it” and then imposing the appropriate punishment. As a result of such a procedure, there is no discussion of the situation, no deeper analysis of the situation, and ultimately the conflicted parties do not reach a common understanding of each other and a sincere agreement (Woźniak, 2021).

The mediator, on the other hand, listens, facilitates the conversation, participates in the meeting, and helps to develop an agreement that is accepted in its entirety by both parties to the conflict. Mediation also makes it possible to voice one's point of view, in the literal sense of, “face the conflict” and then provides an opportunity to outline solutions on one's own, which seems extremely important both in the context of the educational process carried out by the teacher and with regard to the further development of the child. Undoubtedly, it is a time for both parties (the perpetrator and the victim, in the case of violence) to understand the situation that has arisen and to realize the reasons for behaving in the way they did. Mediation proceedings teach not only to speak but first of all to listen, which is sorely lacking in everyday communication, and is undoubtedly an important skill in the process of shaping young personalities (Wajerowska-Oniszczyk, 2003). Therefore, it becomes extremely important that both the school and the teacher are open to innovative work methods and actively use the available alternatives to bring order and social order.

Mediation as a challenge and benefit in teacher's work

The benefits that accrue from the use of mediation both in the work of the teacher and in the school institution as a whole are numerous. It significantly influences the improvement and development of communication skills, which then translates into the creation of correct interpersonal relations both with regard to students and mediators, i.e., teachers, management, or other school employees. Participants in mediation learn to be assertive in expressing their feelings and needs, but at the same time are able to listen to the other side. With regard to students, this is important because the mediation space provides an opportunity for students themselves to understand their own behavior and attitudes, to realize that conflict does not necessarily mean something negative. Mediation leads to learning how to analyze and draw conclusions and, above all, how to deal constructively with the conflicts encountered. This lays the foundation for the proper functioning of the child in adulthood, because if at the school stage (at which time the child is susceptible to the formation of his personality and the assimilation of acceptable patterns) he acquires knowledge of dispute resolution, then it will certainly be easier for him to find his way in various situations in the future. This is crucial, since the school stage is the time to formulate and teach appropriate attitudes, while this opportunity is severely limited in adolescence, where behavior is heavily influenced by the peer group, as well as the rebellious period.

In addition, mediation also provides a space to counteract the occurrence of violence, aggression, or “hate” at school. Because during the conversation, there is an opportunity to look at the problem in a multifaceted way and positive relationships are created. This has a huge impact on the whole situation, as the mediator limits negative emotions, giving the feeling of an “adult” approach to the problem – not a childish insult or complaint, or an independent, often forceful solution. Mediation, therefore, teaches to resolve disagreements without using violence. Surely this brings more benefits than the attitude of a “judge-teacher/director”. Undoubtedly, too, such an approach influences a lasting understanding between students minimizing the occurrence of a similar incident in the future (Raszewska-Skałeczka, 2013, pp. 71–83).

The mediation process also introduces a proper culture of dialogue and fosters friendly relations between all those associated with the educational institution, i.e., teachers, parents, management, or other employees, even in the face of the occurrence of differences in opinion. Because mediation protects the interests of the parties, accepts their rank and importance on an equal footing. Mediation is a method that also significantly affects the creation of a positive image of both the school and the person of the teacher, as it provides an opportunity to talk, and therefore to take into account every rationale, so that no one feels left out or their position disregarded (Czyżowska, 2018(34), pp. 1–10). Through the

opportunity for constructive conversations with parents, there is a chance to discuss all expectations and solutions, so that cooperation goes as well as possible, and thus the teacher is actually free to realize himself in his work.

It is also worth emphasizing the advantages that arise from conducting these proceedings for the teacher himself. Well, with the conduct of mediation, teachers undoubtedly have the opportunity to develop even more strongly their skills in understanding the point of view of another person. In addition, it also influences the expansion of self-awareness in the emotional plane, i.e. they more consciously use in their daily work the fact that emotions significantly affect the behavior of students (Ibarrola, Iriarte, 2013, 180–189).

Performing this role of mediator is not an easy function; however, a teacher is a profession that is characterized by those qualities that are most important in mediation. Thus, a teacher should treat all students the same, inspire development, express empathy, understanding, actively listen, and respond adequately to the needs of students. Thus, these are priority qualities for the mediator's persona because, just like the teacher, the mediator accompanies the student in making actions and decisions. Therefore, it can be said that the role of the mediator is anchored in the role of the teacher. In view of this, fulfilling oneself as a mediator is not only a challenge, but also a mission that the teacher faces.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, mediation used in the school space is an alternative method for resolving conflicts of various backgrounds, reducing the negative effects of misunderstandings, and at least to some extent preventing the increase of violence and aggression among students. It is also worth noting that it has a positive impact on both students and teachers, as it enables cognitive, moral, and emotional development. Furthermore, the use of this process can contribute to improving relations with parents of students, including respect for common needs, which will certainly translate into the overall functioning of the child in the school. Adequate dialogue is the way to a proper joint relationship, which is of great importance especially in the early childhood and school stages. And, by the same token, such an attitude will definitely facilitate the work of teachers.

Nevertheless, mediation is not the answer to all problems that arise at the school level, because it is voluntary, so no one can be forced into it. However, looking at mediation in a broader context, analyzing its advantages and the good resulting from it, its existence should be popularized in Polish education.

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