

Minimalization of failure at school in Poland: Children and youth from socially deprived families

Elzbieta Bielecka

Introduction

The present-day school can play a leading role and can integrate overall influences exerted by various environments, lobbies, bodies, organizations and societies. Here there is much room for the community school or the family-supportive school. M. Winiarski¹ says that the distinction of the community school lies in absorbing two simultaneous impacts : one directly addressed to students and the other indirectly addressed to their family, out-school bodies, students' organizations - actions centered on students' welfare and their family's welfare.

Here I discuss the possibilities of collaboration between school, family and local community. I focus on the minimalization of children's failure at school and staging links with parents from socially deprived community. It must be stressed that the above issues relate to a regular public school. Unlike a private or a non-public school (a parent-run one), the public school does not enjoy a full range of facilities (organization, housing, finance, personnel) to introduce new ideas or activate members of the community. The structure of the financed by private sector school and the motivation of both parents and teachers are totally different.

As a university teacher and having experiences in realizing various educational programmes on behalf of children at risk and socially deprived

families, I wish to share my remarks and tell about my doubts.

By combining theory with practice, I make an attempt to find out:

- what is a chance of minimalization of children's failure at school (children making troubles at school)?
- is it possible at all and if so, how to work with educationally ineffective parents who come from socially deprived families?

Children's Failure at School

The above problem is widely known. Also the cause of it and preventive measures are broadly discussed. Failure at school is defined as 'an emergence of differences between educational purposes and student's progress resulting in negative youth's attitude towards school'². Researchers indicate to different stages of failure, both hidden and open ones. They say that the failure and difficulties at school are linked with developing child's personality and such factors as social, moral, psychological and economic. On the other hand it is just school which is supposed to create a chance of student's developing correct personal features and achieving success. From social viewpoint, school is to facilitate for socially deprived groups access to education. As a practitioner I am concerned about a statement in attachment no. 1 to the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education on the Curriculum for General Education, which reads

'teachers should take actions to give equal opportunity for students'³. It is hard to eliminate educational failure when there is negligence in community and children living in poverty are faced up to career barriers. The question is: do principals, school counselors, teachers, liaison teachers take thorough actions on behalf of the children? How much can school liquidate or considerably reduce the barriers without the support of educational and local government authorities?

T. Lewowicki says that 'student's failure at school is the school's and teachers' failure as well'⁴ and he adds 'the State is relinquishing a lot of commitments and subsidies to the education sector. Local community, parents and teachers are not able to take over all the burden. In consequence, school's setback is a result of the condition of the whole society. But it is children who suffer most'⁵.

Realization by school of prescribed functions

While realizing the prescribed functions on behalf of children neglected, school is supposed to find out the child's living conditions and single out the environmental causes of his lack of school progress:

- find out teaching problems and prepare an efficient organization system to teach student individually and to introduce appropriate teaching techniques;
- stimulate and enhance children and youth's experiences at and out school;
- keep contact with local community.

Budget funds on education are significantly being cut, which decreases a number of teachers, school counselors, liaison teachers, therapists and logopaedists at employment. In many cities the principal in charge of a public school is not an experienced teacher, who should be a post-graduate but 'representative' or supporter of a

political party. These definitely undermine the image of the Polish state-education system. The other problem is how to change the viewpoint of not only experienced teachers with a long length of work but also parents and make these people work together. How to integrate bodies and agencies from the community? My and other researchers' works reveal that most often than not parents see school as a prime action-maker. In addition, the parents who want to be active partners for teachers and be engaged in school activities send their children to private or non-public schools.

Parents are prime educators and care-providers. In many cases teachers blame parents for teaching and educational trouble made by their children. On the other hand teachers are believed to be responsible for making school progress by students. This does not serve well for a child and does not create positive relations between adults: teachers and parents. What is needed is an open conversation and friendly meeting between both sides, and then joint arrangements and educational actions. This makes either side responsible for a proper course of educational process.

In the community school favoring friendly family relationship, teachers in charge support partnership and a stronger position of a parent in school, not just his presence. Parents should be engaged in working out the strategy of actions and improvement of those already implemented. Thus the parents assume responsibility for child's doing at school, in other words child's excuses, lack of motivation to classwork, days absent, tardy etc.

Mutual work by parents and teachers has an enormous effect on child's doing at school, his progress and motivation to enter further schooling. Economic and social benefits exceed largely the costs of child's failure at school.

A well-working project introduced to many European and American schools is the one managed at a family - educational centre, which is also run by parents. Parents, from socially deprived background, like their children experienced negative classification and damaging labels. Therefore the health, educational and recreation programmes in operation are to develop both parents' and children' skills. The programmes can be linked with child's learning at school and addressed to local community.

In the city of Bialystok a team of educators have been making sessions with the educationally ineffective parents. Their children are signed up for the program Big Brother Big Sister. Being an educational supervisor of that programme, which is commissioned for the area of North-East Poland, I can state that the biggest problem is how to convince and mobilize the parents to attend the session regularly. It is very hard for parents to overcome 'habitual helplessness' and 'damaging labels' and then to activate their individual strength. Despite these, one-year's time of putting the programme into practice by working with a child and his parent(s) is bringing profits with regard to some trainees. Some parents are beginning to act differently at home and cope differently with family problems. Also their children are behaving different at school and among his school mates. At the same time more and more schools are applying for admission to the programme Big Brother Big Sister. This implies that within one year the projected objectives are reached. Such results are brought in thanks to having found out the needs of the local community, having interviewed its members, having recruited experienced educators and having given a good training to volunteers, namely students on how to work with children at risk.

The principle of subsidization

As a result of the transition period reforms underway the Polish family is exposed to a number of threats which affect its internal framework and its relations with the society. Such threats have a number of implications and when they come up they bring evil syndrome. Particularly when they accumulate and emerge they have a grave effect on the family-related education. The latest family -educational strategies are centred on backing up and working with the whole family at its natural environment. Only in the natural environment the process of child's socialization and education is effective. Regular and intensive work with the biological family can be a basic weapon against the social pathology. On the other hand putting focus on the child only does not always produce good and long-lasting results. The vast attention should be paid just to a proper functioning of the whole family, including right relationship among family members and prompting emotional links among all the members, but not to reinforcement and restoring parents' care-providing functions. In very hard cases it is advisable to separate family's pathological effects from the child.

Before taking an action, teachers, educators and social workers should answer the following questions: how can we work with parents or care-providers to meet the child's needs and to develop him right?, what are reasons and objectives of our work with the family?, how should we listen and back the parents?

A timely diagnosis describing the cause and mechanism of the pathological condition, effectively eliminates or remedies irregularities, which may in future turn into serious malfunctions or social inadequacy. The home-training and video interaction training techniques answer to when, how and why there is a

communication disturbance or gap among the members of the family. The chief objective of those techniques is to introduce a positive perspective to the family and teach the parents the fundamentals of right communication with their children. In Poland since 1995 the Foundation for Children at Risk based in Cracow has been managing the two-stage Video Interaction Training within SPIN-Poland project. The sessions are addressed to such professions as teachers, educators, psychologists, care-providers, nurses and doctors. By studying the video record those people teach parents how to stimulate a proper development of the child with psychosomatic disturbances.

However the introduction of those techniques is resisted by practitioners, who are not accustomed to working in the new way. Their fear is centered on how to put in practice the techniques while working with the Polish family at risk. When to intervene or provide assistance just on time? Is a Polish parent ready to make self-criticism, to see his faults when in contact with his children and spouse? Another problem bears moral issues, which is the line of interference to the autonomy and self of the other man.

The same doubts came into light when a Video Interaction Training session was held under Socrates-Erasmus Programme at University of Bialystok⁶. Initially the students were skeptical but as soon as the Dutch teachers elaborated they took interest in studying the training strategy and applying the methods in their future teaching career.

Teachers and parents should be prepared for finding out the child's needs and problems in advance. When attending a special training they can learn how to see through such symptoms as malnutrition, insufficient sleep, bullying, dyslexia and others. The identification of those conditions is followed by seeing specialists in right time and providing professional assistance.

The problems experienced by the socially deprived family are complex. Those are caused not only by family conflicts and educational failure but also by financial and housing problems, which in turns, in many cases, result from unemployment, illiteracy and low social status. For these reasons the family needs specific, complex and comprehensive assistance. First and foremost such a family must be encouraged by indicating its positive family elements, which could be: what they can change, what they want, what are their ideas for overcoming the existing problems. How successful a teacher working with a family at risk can be without improving the family's economic status and without guaranteeing its safety? Does he have the right to teach the mother right communication within the family at the time when she is suffering from job loss or money shortage? Does the concept of better future sound fictitious when the family lacks basic means of livelihood?

Therefore parents, educators and social workers should project together child's learning and take care of his health and development. That is not possible unless professionals and community decision-makers establish a social network to support the family in hardship. When introduced, the strategy will improve a project and will considerably affect individual's or family's self-esteem. A sound family builds a strong network of a safe and supportive neighborhood community. Moreover, a sound family reinforces the social involvement of its members and gives trust to social interactions. As a result people gladly enter voluntary organizations.

The strategy of comprehensive support to be made in advance is a parallel realization of preventive projects and it cracks down juvenile delinquency as well.

In-born inactivity and family's malfunction can be curbed by a very interesting and promising project 'career-ladders for parents' introduced by H. Lawson and K. Briar-Lawson⁷. It is designed for unemployed, illiterate parents and to be realized by family-supportive community schools and social and health service agencies. The parents who enter the project can:

- change their attitude towards school as an institution;
- get involved in school and help a teacher,;
- be awarded a diploma of teacher aide;
- continue their education for career in school, social welfare system, health service or government administration.

The project is addressed to both generations because it meets the parent's needs and prevents future family problems. It also intensifies the work of teachers and social workers.

Not every step of this ladder can be introduced to the Polish schools. Nevertheless one must make an attempt of activating parents, particularly in a socially - neglected community.

Another important issue is minimalization of children's failure at school and comprehensive

work with the child and his family in a rural community. T. Pilch says 'the destitute rural community enjoys the lowest grade of education and the highest number of children. It destines to live the life of their

forefathers. Unless the community is inspired by promoting and counseling sessions, the number of such communities will be on increase'⁸. In practice this problem has not been overcome because the locals receive a minimal social welfare, insufficient education for parents and counseling for children. There have not been overall research programmes or theoretical studies on the activation of rural community.

This paper describes difficulties and hopes for building relations between family, public school and local community.

The family-supportive school will succeed if parents, teachers, local authorities are motivated enough and prepared for the introduction of that project, if they understand that the strategy of cooperation and responsibility for education of new generation is a bridge to the future.

Notes

1 Winiarski, M. (2000), *Family – school – local community*. IBE Press, Warsaw, p.249.

2 Okon, W. (1996), *New educational dictionary*, 'Zak' Press, Warsaw, p.190.

3 *Journal of Laws* of 1999, No. 14/129, Attachment 1, Warsaw.

4 Lewowicki, T. (1998), *Failure at School (typical formulations – conditions – positive programmes, pedagogy of success at school)*, in: J. Lyska (Eds.) *Failure at School*, 'Impuls' Press, Cracow, p 36.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

6 Since 1996 the author of the article has been organising and co-ordinating exchange programs for students at the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology at the University of Bialystok, Poland, and Fontys Hogescholen SPH, Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

7 Lawson, H. & Briar-Lawson, K. (1997), *Connecting the Dots: Progress Toward the Integration of School Reform, School-Linked Services, Parent Involvement and Community Schools*, Oxford, Ohio.

8 Pilch, T. (1999), *Controversies about school*, 'Zak' Press, Warsaw, p. 140.