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The Pedagogical Transformative Drama in Working with SEBD Pupils. Case Studies in a Polish School

Kinga Anna Gajda

The Institute of European Studies of Jagiellonian University, ul. Jodłowa 13, Kraków 31-221, Poland

Abstract

Education and therapy through art is increasingly often used to work with various groups of marginalized pupils. Henry Giroux defined this form of teaching as *pedagogy for difference*. Giroux postulates to create a kind of creative education which would make it possible to build a space for those belonging to what Gina Buijs calls the "subdued groups". The new way of teaching should give the participants of the teaching process an opportunity to express themselves. Pupils with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (SEBDs) belong to such a group, one from the sphere of "elsewhere". The first aim of the paper is to present the results of working with SEBD pupils in a Polish school. During the classes, a pedagogical transformative drama was used. The second aim of this paper is to present the pedagogical transformative drama for children and the ways of using it in working with SEBD pupils.

Introduction

Education and therapy through art is being used to work with various groups of marginalized people and it often brings the expected results. All such forms of work can be called *pedagogy for difference,* as Henry Giroux puts it. Giroux characterizes pedagogy for difference by "an ongoing effort to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective – a view from 'elsewhere'". (Giroux, 1989) Giroux postulates to create a kind of creative education which would make it possible to build a space for those who belong to a what Gina Buijs called the "muffled group." (Buijs,1996) The method gives marginalized people a possibility to express their own perspective – the perspective from beyond the mainstream. Pupils with SEBD are members of muffled groups.

Corresponding Author: Kinga Anna Gajda
E-mail: annagajda@gmail.com

Pupils with behavioral and emotional difficulties (PBEs), as well as pupils with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (SEBDs) are pupils with specific learning difficulties and with Individual Educational Needs (IEN). They often come into conflict with school and class rules. They do not accept boundaries and do not understand the rules of social coexistence. They tend to get into fights, not to listen to the commands of teachers, and they are often rude. Working with these destructive and rebellious students is a particular challenge for teachers. The bad behavior of students not only interferes with the process of learning and teaching, but also it is a potential risk to other students. As Carmel Cefai writes in *Supporting the inclusive education of student with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties,* pupils with SEBD are often excluded from the school society. Cefai uses the term *exclusion* which refers to *social exclusion*, alienation and marginalization. In this way, he underlines the fact that pupils with SEBDs cannot function normally in the classroom, because they are not treated on a par with its other members. This term also points to the fact that the excluded are not guilty of their situation and the phenomenon of exclusion is beyond their control. In practice, the phenomenon of exclusion of students with SEBDs leads to the impossibility of their full participation in the process of learning understood as education and development of students. It is also an act of denial of rights and opportunities for the students' development. The author considers this kind of treatment these pupils face as social impairment and injustice, which consequently can cause emotional, psychological and social trauma. along with various diseases.

The dialog, and listening to what pupils with SEBD have to say proposed by Cefai are close to the changes and optimization of the Polish system of education in the field of special education, counseling and psychological-pedagogical help proposed in 2010by the Department of Special Needs Education at the Ministry of Education's Department of Educational Opportunities . According to a ministerial bulletin, recognition of the causes of school failures and the students' specific learning difficulties, along with potential opportunities for them and individual needs are very important. As Carmel Cefai and Paul Cooper put it in their article "The introduction of nature groups in Maltese schools: a method of promoting inclusive education" reflection on the pupils' difficulties and problems in our time should be deeper as more and more global issues are affecting European youth. "The pace of social and technological change in the twenty-first century leaves children exposed to unprecedented pressures and stressors with which they are ill-equipped to deal with. The accompanying growth in the dominance of individualism and the associated abdication of social responsibility in western culture have become a major threat to the social and emotional well-being of children and young people." (Cefai, Cooper 2011) A growing number of European children grow up in single-parent families, in a world full of violence and permeated with a fear of violence, rampant competition, the rat race and increasing social inequality.

The pressures, stress, difficult relationships with peers, competition, phobias and depression are the daily experience of European children. They are the cause of their social, emotional and behavioral problems. Increasingly, protest and revolt against the contemporary world becomes the ground of their process of constructing their own identities. This rebellion often leads to aggression, denial of the rules of the adult world, negating the school environment and loud cries for being noticed. Students, as emphasized by the psychology classics, instead of becoming independent individuals, building their self-esteem and realizing their emotional, social and psychological needs, sink into phobias, depression and stress disorders. Such pupils need specific methods of teaching. The aim of the work with this group of students should involve their adaptation to to work and engage in learning. As Paul Cooper notices, work in this group can be considered as therapeutic education. (Cooper, 2001) For Giroux, it is pedagogy for difference, while Cefai considers this group of students in the category of integrated teaching and proposes individual educational programs an individual component of the curriculum. The pedagogical transformative drama can be successfully included in individual education programs.

Pedagogical transformative drama is inspired by the theory of education through art. It can be used to complement other methods of pedagogical-psychological work oriented at enabling pupils to define their own identity, describe and solve their daily problems, adapt to the culture and society and prevent violence. The process of reading and interpreting dramas, along with the possibilities to translate the text of the drama into stage language, or to use drama in drama workshops, as well as the process of drama- writing can be used on every level of teaching. The aim of the work with drama is to start discussion and to trigger dialogical action. The process is always based on and concerns individual experiences, emotions and reflections. Therefore, the aim of the pedagogical transformative drama is the prevention and treatment of psychological disturbances. (Kościelska, 2000) Therefore, the drama seeks to facilitate and stimulate the process of the formation of personality and identity, building the subjectivity, structure and functions of the self, as well as launching the cognitive activity of "me and everybody else around me". Another purpose of using drama in teaching is also to strengthen self-acceptance and stimulate the

process of self-definition. There are two types of using the pedagogical transformative drama: the passive one which is based on conversation about the drama and bases on bibliotherapy, and the active one which is based on drama-writing or preparing a theatrical performance based on the drama. Within the frame of the active method of using the drama, drama workshops can be prepared as well. The second method of using drama can be used in therapy through the theatre. The aim of this kind of work is to stimulate the process of acquiring self-knowledge, to develop imagination, awareness, beliefs and feelings – and to learn independent ways of thinking.

The transformative drama stimulates pupils' individual development and allows them possible to transform their identities. The transformative effect is matched to their age. The children's drama concentrates on their problems and it deals with them a fairy tale convention. It uses, therefore, therapy through fairy tale. It allows children to understand the reasons and consequences of their activities and rises the awareness of pupils, as well as teaches them how to overcome difficulties and not give up in the face of trouble. It often touches the subject of children's dreams, choices, skills and opportunities to achieve happiness. Another important theme here are children's fears – that of the dark, loneliness, animals etc. The drama contains a formula of scenarios which can be used in preparing performances with children. It is short, its language and style are very simple, and it often includes speech therapy exercises. The pedagogical transformative drama always leads to a meeting with the pupils, who are treated subjectively as authors, co-authors, or interpreters – and is bound with their everyday life. Thus, therapy through the pedagogical transformative drama seems to be pedagogical therapy, pedagogy for difference, or an element of corrective pedagogy, or one of social prevention, which downplays the implications of school failure resulting from disorders, inhibitions, negativity, school refusal, antisocial behavior, etc. (Borecka, 2001) Therapy through pedagogical transformative drama can be treated as pedagogical therapy, i.e. as an a combination of corrective pedagogy and social pedagogy. This very assumption is regarded as crucial in the implementation of therapy though pedagogical transformative drama in working with children who are six years old and have socio-emotional and behavioral problems, or who exhibit a tendency to violence and aggression.

The aim of the project discussed is to prevent violence and to teach children help each other and share, along with building their self-esteem. In a six weeks period, pupils from a Krakow primary school had one drama lesson per week. During the first three lessons, the pupils and their teacher would read dramas. The dramas were adaptations of therapeutic stories by Robert Fisher. His stories, as well as the pedagogical transformative drama can be included as a part of positive psychology as described by the American psychologist Martin Seligman. (Seligman, 1991; Seligman, 1996; Seligman, 2002) The aim of positive psychology is the well-being of an individual. Many theorists, including Fisher and Jonathan Barnes suggest that positive psychology, based on learning positive emotions and creativity, supports this kind of learning. As Barnes notes in his article "You Could See It on Their Faces," (Barnes, 2005) creativity and activity provoke positive thinking. Stimulation of creativity and joy are the aim of Fisher's stories. In order to meet these objectives, the stories reflect the everyday world of children. In the form of humans, animals, robots or magical creatures they talk about children's dreams, needs, values, etc. They talk in such a way that the child can relate the narrative story to his or her reality. Thus, the story is meant as a contribution to dialogue between pupils and their teacher, and among the children. Fisher calls this method of using stories the community of enguire. The method enables pupils, by asking questions and engaging in a discussion to become a critical and creative reader. The method is called one of philosophical discussion by Fisher in his text "Talking to Think." (Fischer, 2006) Fisher underlines that the method of interaction allows the students to associate the reading content with an experience, and to identify the most important themes and ideas, as well as hide the meanings of the story read. It also allows them to assessing, distinguish opinions and evidence. and address criticism. He notes that the method of philosophical discussion develops and strengthens emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman, the emotional intelligence expert, identifies it with self-awareness, which means paying attention to one's emotions. Such self-consciousness is not the attention or control of emotions and forced to exaggerate what is perceived. It is rather a neutral state, giving the possibility of self-reflection in emotional moments. (Goleman, 1997) It is, therefore, extremely important for Fisher to be excitant of positive emotions and reflection of a reader. Fisher underlines the fact that emotional intelligence includes those elements which are so important in his stories and which are stimulated by dialogism, as well as communicational and philosophical aspects of his texts. The matter concerns self-awareness, i.e. the knowledge of what the author's intention is and what the realistic abilities of the individual are, of self-regulation and control of emotions, of motivation stimuli – perseverance in the face of setbacks – empathy and social skills – the ability to read social situations by using persuasion and exercising one's negotiation skills.

The use of dramas in primary schools in Krakow is based on stories by Fisher and tell about violence and the ways of stopping it (a drama about a girl and children who tease her), about sharing (drama about a thinker who shared cakes with his family and drama about cats who do not want to share a pancake). The last drama is a text written by a Polish playwright Agnieszka Kusza, who works on a daily basis with children. The drama focuses on the problem of self-esteem (it is about a girl who had two left hands and who is afraid of paying the piano). During the next classes, children write their own dramas. First they draw a comic and then write the drama with the help of their teacher. In the frame of the project, the comic is treated as a semi-drama with its multi-perspectives' dialog, the division of roles, along with its educational, preventive and therapeutic application. "Literature in figures," as Radolphe Töpffer, a Geneva teacher and a precursor of pictorial history defined the comic, is more often used to tell stories about children's and adolescents' problems. (Bellstorf, 2007; Hickis, 2012; Telgemeier, 2012) The comic is in fact more attractive and easier for children than the drama. Another way to create children's own drama is improvisation on stage, which is recorded on video and then written down as a dramatic form by the teacher.

The last exercise during the project was an attempt to write the drama down by children. The drama lessons often take place outside the classroom – in the auditorium or in the library. The drama is read or acted out by children. To facilitate the activity, the teacher uses sheets with the names of characters in order for the audience to remember who plays who. The drama is enacted and read two or three times by different children. During the reading, the audience creates a soundtrack (ex. the noise of the wind, hooting owls, a meowing cat, etc.) or tells the actors how to play a specific character. After the reading, the audience is divided into groups: designers, directors and costume designers. They develop stage movement, costumes and decorations. It is important that after the drama-reading, the teacher organizes a debate. The children sit around and roll a ball. The person who catches the ball comments on the drama with her or his words, or answers questions prepared by the teacher (the form of discussion depends on which form is easier for pupils). Then, the pupils come back to the text, and the teacher reads it, interrupting in the culminating points to ask children to comment or play out a scene. The children can also invent their own ending of the story. Interestingly, children gradually come to willingly speak up to refer to the behavior and choices of the *dramatis personae,* and more and more frequently compare the behavior of characters to everyday situations.

Children who have similar problems as the characters identify themselves with the characters the most easily. For example, during the implementation of the theme of violence, Kamil responds very quickly and honestly. He says that there is always a need to intervene when someone is arguing or when someone bullies another person. He admits that it is still difficult for him to talk to Szymon, who teased him because he remembers those events and because Szymon prefers to initiate arguments. Julia, who plays the role of a cat, confesses that during playing her role she is afraid to oppose the existing situation and to stop the quarrels of others in order to not be hit. She notes that only people who do not like each other argue. Children also receive the information that a person who bullies others is not popular. The construction of the drama, the use of elements of bibliotherapy and therapy through theater and drama enable them to co-create lessons. They readily take part in the lesson and give sincere and spontaneous answers. They engage in discussion and seek similarities between the dramatic situation and their daily reality. The six-week session period brings very positive results.

The evaluation has shown that the use of pedagogical transformative drama in working with children with SEBD improves the quality and efficiency of schoolwork. Lessons run in an atmosphere of caring, support, good peer relations and friendship. Nobody feels inferior, excluded, not listened to and no one is treated unfairly. Everyone can actively participate and openly express their emotions. It is possible thanks to the selection of the drama adopted as a medium of conversation. The convention of multiple perspectives and dialog allow the expression of different opinions, different attitudes and choices of the dramatis personae. Children using the example of the characters can, without the risk of embarrassing themselves, talk about their domestic problems, fears and hardships. Also the convention of drama and theater consisting of a clearly outlined position of a sender (an orator, a speaker) and a recipient (a viewer, a listener), which guarantees everyone the opportunity to speak and be heard has proven to be highly significant. Such subjectivity in the way of treating pupils became an antidote to their usually insatiate social, emotional and behavioral needs. The screenplays of the drama lessons assume abandoning and changing the familiar ways of teaching, utilizing motor and emotional involvement in the lesson. The work with pedagogical transformative dramas treated as therapeutic tales and therapeutic parabolas furthermore strengthens positive behavioral patterns in pupils. The method of dividing the students into functional groups, supporting the work of one group by another, and the opportunity to defend and the opposite points of view allows

the pupils to be actively involved in the work in an atmosphere of support and *communitas*.

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