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Are Pupils Taking a Proactive Part in the School Social Life Popular Within Their Peer Group?[*]

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Politicians, employers and teachers all expect from their citizens, employees and students active attitudes, initiative and engagement in social actions. Activity and enterprise attitudes prompt us to act. They affect the form of social environment and lead to us taking responsibility for our own actions. Early social experiences are a significant factor conducive to the development of an active attitude. Depending largely on the character of the experience, our activity is of either a *reactive* or a *proactive* nature.

Reactive behaviours are related to passive elements of socialization, and result from our passive adjustment to the environment. Individuals who are characterized by a reactive action style demonstrate a specific type of participation in social life. This includes acquiesce to recommendations, low independence, making use of knowledge tested in other situations when referring to group actions, and a high level of directive behaviours when it comes to managing the work of the group (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2003).

Proactive behaviours are connected with a subjective participation in group functioning, and are linked to the activity characterized by a high degree of organizational initiative, independence, the provision of new ideas and participation in group actions based not only on complying with work conditions but also on assenting to them (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2003).

During the debates over education and its profile, questions about the conversion from socialization to upbringing are raised more and more frequently. It is pointed out that the function of education is not limited to the adjustment of young people to function within social systems. Above all, education means upbringing, and thus stimulating the development of a pupil, treating them as a person who understands and creates and thus actively affects his/her social environment. A subjective education is not feasible without the development of proactive behaviours.

This research, conducted on a group of Polish teachers, shows that declarative level teachers think highly of the behaviours classified as proactive and are reluctant to accept the reactive behaviour of their students (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2003). An interesting question arises, as to whether proactive actions are valued by children themselves within their peer group. This question was a research problem tackled during a series of tests carried out with the participation of younger primary school pupils.

Method

The aim of the tests was to ascertain whether behaviours of a proactive type are accepted by children within their peer group. Subsequently, proactive type behaviours served as the dependent variable and the acceptance of the behaviours within a peer group as the independent variable.

The tests assumed that behaviour of a proactive type would refer both to everyday pupils' activity during a lesson and the 'after school' activity connected with functioning within a peer group. Therefore the following behaviours of the pupils were tested:
- Demonstrating organizational initiative in after-school activities, such as proposing games, trips, etc.
- Demonstrating organizational initiative during school activities, such as organisation during a lesson: fetching chalk, showing eagerness to tidy the classroom
- Demonstrating interpersonal initiative, such as readiness to build relations with others, helping with homework, standing up for those wronged, etc.

Behaviour of a proactive type was measured at two levels through self-descriptive methods:

1. Determining the activity by the child by self-descriptive methods: pupils were given test questionnaires of eight statements, and were asked to make a statement about each, whether it described what the child does (circling the YES answer) or it is mot consistent with his/her action (circling the NO answer). The positive answer pointed to proactivity, and the negative ones to a lack of proactivity.
2. Determining the activity by the teacher. Because younger primary school children were considered to have a low level of insight, the questionnaires were also presented to the teacher. Their task was to express his/her opinion about each pupil (circling the YES answer if the statement characterized the behaviour of the pupil, or NO if was not). As primary teachers conduct most classes with their pupils, spending 4 to 5 hours per day with the, they are able to observe pupils during lesson and breaks: their opinions will be based on rich experience of working with the pupils they were asked to describe.

The division of the evaluation of pupils' proactivity into two levels was to prevent assessment subjectivity, both on the part of the pupil and on the part of the teacher, and thus to increase the reliability of the research process.

Acceptance of proactive behaviours was measured by the level of social attractiveness of the children within their peer group. It was assumed that proactive behaviour manifested in everyday life would affect social status. A sociometric test was conducted with all pupils of each class: questions were read to the class, and they were asked to nominate the person they would wish to co-operate with in a given situation. The questions included in this sociometric test covered the following categories:
    (1) Confidence – with whom you would entrust with your savings

(2) Willingness to cooperate while fulfilling school tasks – who you would like to work with in a group

(3) Personal bonds – who you would like to go on holidays with.

Before the tests began, research hypotheses had been formulated. We expected that pupils demonstrating proactive behaviours would be perceived as attractive partners of social interactions in all dimensions under the examination: they would enjoy a greater confidence, they would be more frequently chosen as partners for cooperation and for interpersonal relations.

88 pupils aged 8 and 9, representing three primary school classes, and their teachers took part in the tests.

From the test results the level of proactivity of each child, verified by the teacher assessment, was determined. Three groups of pupils were identified: pupils characterized by high social attractiveness (sociometric stars), a group of pupils characterized by moderate social attractiveness, and a group of pupils characterized by low social attractiveness. Finally, the proactivity levels and social status of each pupil were compared.

Test Results

Assessment of Pupils' Proactivity

Pupils' proactivity was assessed with the a self-descriptive questionnaire, divided into stages: (1) pupils' self-assessment, (2) teacher's assessment. The questionnaire consisted of 8 questions. The number of points that could be obtained was between 0 and 8.

The results of the assessments by pupils and teachers is shown in figure 1. The proactivity levels were determined arbitrarily, according to the following citriteria:

- 0 to 2 points in the proactivity questionnaire - low proactivity
- 3 to 6 points - moderate proactivity
- 7 to 8 points - high proactivity.

At the level of teacher's assessments no discrepancies were observed.

Figure 1: Comparison of assessments of proactivity by pupils and teachers
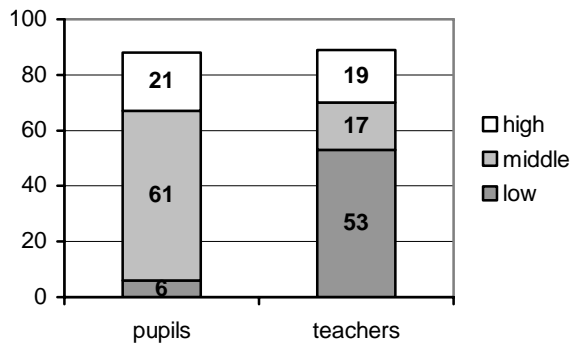

Pupils perceived themselves as being moderately or highly proactive. Only six pupils (7%) judged their behaviour to be low level of proactivity. But the teachers thought as many as 52 of the children tested (60%) showed low levels of proactivity. This discrepancies in assessments could be caused by several factors. The pupils might lack insight into their own behaviour; they might be unable to differentiate between their intended behaviour and their actual behaviour; and there might be misunderstanding of the task instructions. Difference shown in the teachers' assessments might be the result of liking a particular pupil, having more critical approaches to proactivity, or to poor experience in observations of some of the pupils. Because of these variations, only 42 pupils were nominated (47% of the initial group) as those where the child's self-assessment and the teacher's assessment were the same. Among these pupils, the children with low proactivity were the smallest group (14%). The two groups showing medium and high levels of proactivity were comparable in size (41% and 45% respectively) (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Pupils whose proactivity level was rated similarly by both the pupil and the teacher
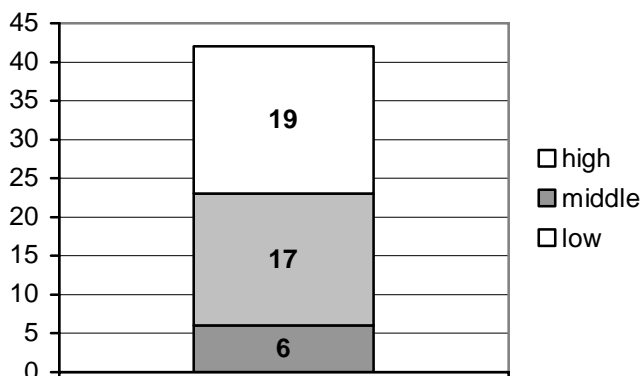
The lowest degree of conformity was in the evaluation of low proactivity. The non-comparability of groups with different proactivity levels, and the small number of pupils in low proactivity group suggest the results of comparisons should be treated with a high degree of caution.

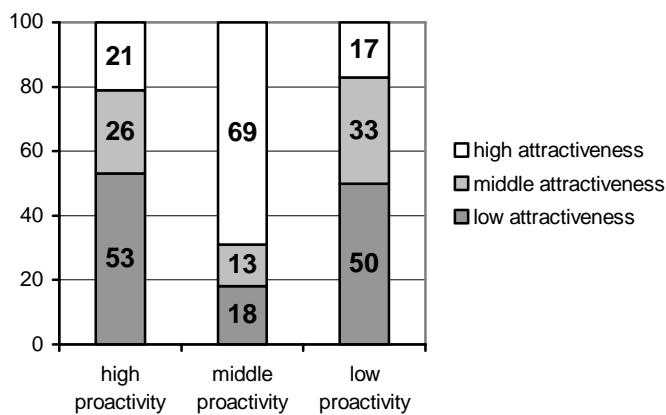*Assessment of Pupils' Social Attractiveness*

As a result of the sociometric test, three groups of pupils were identified in each class:
- individuals with high social attractiveness – "sociometric stars" – pupils holding a high position in their peer group and whose number of indications is over 1 standard deviation from the average
- individuals of average social attractiveness – whose number of indications is within 1 standard deviation from the average
- individuals of low social attractiveness – whose number of indications is below 1 standard deviation 0from the average.

Comparison of the Proactivity Level with the Social Attractiveness Assessment

A comparative analysis of proactivity levels and attractiveness levels was carried out, and the results presented in Chart 3.

Chart 3: Pupils' proactivity level versus their social attractiveness

The results presented in Chart 3 show that:
- pupils with a high level of proactivity are seen as rather unattractive in their peer group
- pupils with the highest social attractiveness show average proactivity.

A supplementary analysis concerning various parameters of attractiveness of highly proactive pupils was performed. The results show that within the dimensions of:

- willingness to cooperate, they obtained the highest number of indications – 41% of the pupils representing the highest proactivity group are attractive as partners to work with in a lesson.
- personal bonds, they did not show any indication, meaning that none of the pupils characterized by a high level of proactivity was a person other children would like to make friends with.

Conclusions

Educational studies show an increasing tendency to raise questions concerning subjective upbringing as well as the development of pupils' proactivity. In aiming at educating proactive individuals, it is worth considering social mechanisms that either encourage such behaviours or suppress them. The tests presented in this paper reveal one of the elements of the 'social promotion' of proactive behaviours. Promotion means rewarding proactive individuals by perceiving them as socially attractive.

The results show surprising relationships and contradict assumed outcomes. They suggest that moderate proactivity overlaps with high social attractiveness. As for proactive children, they are the least socially attractive. When their peers want to see them as partners for interaction is predominantly when there needs to be cooperation fulfilling a task.

It could be assumed that children characterized by a low level of social engagement would also enjoy low popularity among the peers, or could even be rejected by the group. However, it was found that low proactivity does not affect social attractiveness.

The question arises: does it pay to be proactive? The test results clearly show that the question is not simply rhetorical, and that the answer is not obvious. Firstly, developing proactive behaviour in individuals who seriously need social acceptance may expose them to frustrations caused by aversion in establishing relationships like friendship. Secondly, showing initiative is not an important way to gain a position in a group for those who are perceived as not very attractive. This is because individuals characterized by a low level of proactivity are not less socially isolated in comparison to other groups. Proactivity and its development do not belong to the area of social reinforcements.

The tests were conducted on a small population. Due to the lack of equivalence in the groups participating in the research, as well as specifically defined proactivity, limited to just a few questions about typical school behaviour, the results should be treated with a high degree of caution. Although surprising and contrary to intuition, the results may however be treated as food for thought as well as an inspiration for further research in this field.

References

Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz B (2003) Self-responsibility as a social competence determining participation in the live of a social group. in: A Ross (ed) *A Europe of Many Cultures,* London: CiCe