Marlena Kaźmierska
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

Assertiveness as a social competence in the school reality of students

Abstract: The main aim of the article is to highlight the development of assertiveness in students. The article presents concepts of social skills and assertiveness. It emphasises the issue of non-assertive behaviour in education. Next, the article describes the value of assertiveness skills to the life of the student and presents teachers with methods for teaching assertiveness to children.

The contemporary socio-cultural reality, characterised by intensive dynamics of change, requires constant updating of knowledge and skills in the field of psychosocial and socio-pedagogical activities. One of the areas which is characterised by a strong relationship with the specificity of modernity is undoubtedly the social functioning of individuals formed in the basic socialisation environments, including the school environment. In the face of contemporary socio-cultural changes, education faces an extremely important and difficult task: to try to create and develop social skills in every student, which can be shaped by using various stimulation methods, as well as social training. One such capacity is assertiveness, a category which is an essential subject of the theoretical deliberations undertaken in this article.

Assertiveness is a type of social competence, which is presented in a multi-threaded and ambiguous way. The first to introduce the term "social skills" was

R. White in 1959, who dealt with the issue of exerting influence on social environment. He understood "competence" as a kind of skill that leads to effective interaction with the environment. In this way, he linked competences to social skills.

According to M. Argyle, social competences include the "ability, having the necessary skills to have the desired impact on other people in social situations. These desired effects can lie in getting others to make purchases, to learn, to acquire mental health." In turn A. Matczak defines this term as the "complex skills that determine the effectiveness of coping with a given type of social situation, acquired by the individual during social training". In Spitzberg's and Cupach's view, social competences are the ability to build emotional bonds with other people, and they are included in the category of defining relations, creating, developing and maintaining relationships and gaining social support.

Social competences consist of many interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. According to M. Argyle, there is a division of social skills according to the characteristics of a socially competent person. They include assertiveness – the ability to exert influence on others, while at the same time being the opposite of aggression and passive behaviour – as well as gratification – the effect of support in social situations, which consists in sustaining others and increasing their self-esteem. Nonverbal and verbal communication are also examples of social skills resulting from personal characteristics of the subject. Verbal communication is a key social skill because most signals are verbal and must fit in the conversation sequence, which means that each message must be comprehensible to the recipient. Non-verbal communication is a complement to it, as it is expressed in certain types of gestures, facial expressions and body postures.

Other components of social competence are empathy, cooperation and attention focused on others. Empathy is the ability to share emotions felt by another person and to understand their point of view, to understand another person's situation. The category of empathy is also linked to the ability to cooperate. The essence of effective cooperation is to take into account one's own needs as well as those of other members of the interaction at the same time. Every kind of social activity requires the establishment of mutual relations between people, and therefore the ability to cooperate with others is not without significance.

Recognising and solving problems is also an important element of social competence. Soft skills play a key role in this area of social skills. Behaviour is controlled by the existence of informal social norms and depends on situational and motivational factors.

Another significant skill is self-presentation, which concerns the relation between social competences and the self-esteem of those entering the interaction, as

well as the way in which they react to the behaviour of others. An individual's own image is a set of notions that an individual has about themselves, such as social roles, character traits and appearance. Self-presentation is behaviour designed to influence how others see us.

Abilities related to personality traits are another element of social competences; for example, directness is correlated with social competence.

Assertiveness requires mastery of such skills as verbal and non-verbal communication, self-presentation, learning and solving problems, and having skills in various situations and relationships.

The term "assertiveness" comes from the word "assertive", which is understood as "a way of behaving that expresses one's own emotions or rights with determination, strength and self-confidence and reveals to others a deep faith in one's own abilities [...] a self-confident behaviour that evokes the respect of others."

In H. Sęk's view, assertiveness is "a complex set of personal competences consisting in effective achievement of important life goals, with simultaneous, constant confirmation and defence of a positive self-image." In turn, N. Branden understands assertiveness as respecting one's own needs, desires and values, as well as searching for one's own ways of expressing them in daily life. On the other hand, M. Król-Kijewska emphasises that assertiveness is the ability to reveal and express oneself in contact with another person; it does not refer only to interpersonal relations, but also to a specific way of thinking of the individual.

According to Lazarus' concept, assertiveness consists of four components: rejecting requests, making requests and giving instructions, expressing positive and negative feelings, as well as starting, continuing and ending a general conversation. Lazarus noted the correlation of assertiveness with many elements of verbal and non-verbal communication. The essence of every form of social impact is a verbal wish. If it is to be effective, it must be convincing, that is to say, one should motivate and convince by indicating good reasons or incentives to carry out an order. The verbal commands must be accompanied by an appropriate non-verbal style. The impact is greater when there is already a strong bond of friendship, authority or both.

Assertiveness is an ability that is manifested by assertive behaviour, which consists in adequate, (i.e. in harmony with itself), open, firm, honest, but controlled expression of one's own opinion, i.e. self-expression of one's beliefs, attitudes, needs and emotions, as well as the realisation and management of the requirements of one's own life relations, while respecting and managing the personal rights of others involved in those relations.

The manner in which assertive behaviour is disclosed depends on a number of factors. The nature of an individual's situation, their knowledge of how to behave

in certain circumstances, and the type of interaction they have with one or more of their relationship partners are essential to determining the right behaviour.

Through the manner in which assertiveness manifested itself, H. Sęk selected three types of assertive skills. The first is expressive skills, which include expressing emotions and desires through verbal and non-verbal language. It also lists interpersonal skills, which include communication, requests for support, starting relationships, reactions to evaluations and praise, defending one's own opinion and refusing requests. Task skills are also important, e.g. proving one's own rights, defending a victim, acquiring the necessary resources to achieve goals, overcoming obstacles, implementing breakthrough ideas. Assertive behaviours are aimed at defending and developing the "self" and effectively implementing one's own ideas and values, but they must not violate the welfare of other people.

Wolpe distinguished between positive – "praised" – and negative – "hostile" – assertiveness. An example of the former is the expression of gratitude, and the latter – the expression of dissatisfaction. Grambrill based his classification of assertive behaviour on this division. The author listed two main aspects of assertiveness: first, whether the behaviour is positive or negative, and second, whether the behaviour is initiated by an individual, or is a response to someone else's behaviour. In this way, he distinguished four main types of assertiveness, each of which covers several detailed categories.

The first is a negative assertion in response to a situation in which someone else takes the initiative, that is, the ability to say "no" to a demand that an individual cannot meet. It consists of the following behaviour: refusal of demands and reaction to criticism.

The second is negative assertion combined with taking the initiative to take over the initiative in order to bring about a change in the environment. The following types of behaviour are possible: demand of a change in someone's offensive behaviour or unjust treatment; defending oneself from being interrupted while speaking or acting; apologising when one is guilty, which requires one to take the initiative in a situation that is awkward for the individual; admitting one's ignorance; and ending unwanted interactions.

Next is a positive assertion when someone else takes the initiative. Social interactions often require a positive assertion, which is a response to another person's initiative. In this case, there are several possible categories of assertive behaviour: accepting compliments; responding to the other person's initiative; and accepting an invitation or responding to a meeting proposal.

We can also distinguish "meeting the needs", i.e. taking the initiative. This kind of assertiveness also includes several subcategories: starting a conversation; main-

taining a conversation; arranging future contacts and ending a conversation; asking for a favour; paying others compliments; and showing emotions.

The opposite of assertive behaviour is non-assertive behaviour, also referred to as passive or submissive. The reason for such behaviour is a person's lack of belief in the possibility of having their own convictions, choices and feelings.

Another reason for the lack of assertiveness are the processes of a child's socialisation, which teach them to control negative feelings and force the child to stop revealing them in interpersonal contacts. Currently, Polish schools are bringing up successive generations of subordinate and submissive students. The obedient and submissive pupils are rewarded, while the rebellious and stubborn ones who have the courage to speak out loud, are punished. Such behaviour is also the result of inadequate cultural habits, which support dependent and modest behaviours. Another reason for the lack of readiness to defend one's rights and the right to express oneself openly is social and economic factors. On the one hand, the issue at hand here is parental anxiety, which creates anxiety in the child as a result of modelling. On the other hand, using the model of a modest and dependent child is not without significance for negative educational attitudes. The aim of passive behaviour is to avoid direct confrontation and conflicts, which are connected with the experience of reluctance or anger on the part of society.

Currently, the prevailing trend in education is striving to make the student an independent and autonomous individual. This is to accompany the child's education from the very beginning. At a certain stage of development, an individual achieves such autonomy and independence in acting, thinking, living and making choices.

Assertiveness exercises strengthen the positive image of oneself, shape a sense of control and agency, and increase effectiveness in interpersonal contacts. The ability to be assertive is one of the main tools in counteracting and preventing addictions and other types of risky behaviours. The development of assertiveness competence also prevents disturbances in children's behaviour and personalities and supports their development. It allows a young person to cope more effectively with difficult situations and to gain the support of the community.

An important task for educators is to support their pupils in reaching full maturity by stimulating their self-development activities, strengthening their self-esteem, self-control, responsibility and making decisions about themselves.

Shaping an assertive attitude as an element of pedagogical work is a prerequisite for achieving educational effectiveness. A teacher who respects, tolerates and takes into account their students' views, opinions, experiences, emotions and values creates a supportive environment in which educational success is easier

to achieve. An assertive teacher treats a pupil subjectively. Such a teacher is firm and gentle and does not use violence, aggression or manipulation to achieve their educational goals. The attitude of this type of educator becomes a role model for students. The pupils are more willing and more likely to use the teacher's social competences, accept their educational style and feel that they are safe and have agency at the same time.

Developing assertiveness is not easy, therefore it should only be undertaken by educators who fully understand the essence of this social skill and who are convinced of its positive impact on the psychosocial functioning of the student.

It is important that teachers themselves demonstrate assertive behaviour as often as possible. It should be remembered that when an educator develops assertive competences, they must make the child feel that they fully accept them and praises the assertive behaviour of the pupil. Support and acceptance should also be given to all students to help them build the right self-esteem.

There are a number of exercises that shape assertiveness in children. The most effective way, according to J. Mączyński, is assertiveness training, which is "a planned programme of therapeutic effects aimed at reducing aggressive and non-assertive behaviour, and modelling readiness for assertive behaviour in various social situations, so that an individual can learn to express their feelings, to master and extinguish their fear, to control their own behaviour and to defend their rights without violating the rights of other people".

Such training is aimed at achieving the skills of free self-expression, interpersonal communication, an active life attitude, defending one's own opinions, rights and interests. Its most important goal is to help the child develop an assertive attitude.

The course of such training is as follows: at first, the teacher explains the concept of assertiveness and its essence to the pupils, then the teacher offers the children an exercise that makes them aware of the importance of having their own rights, after which they share their feelings about participating in the exercise. Assertiveness training is aimed at raising awareness of the reason for feeling unwell. Homework is also part of the exercise, as it consists of drawing up a charter of one's own rights, bearing in mind that they must not conflict with the rights of others. At the next meeting, the children fill in the assertiveness questionnaire, and then the teacher assesses which situations are most often difficult for the pupils. Each exercise of all types of assertive behaviour is preceded by a mini-lecture in which the students are given a description of the principles and process of assertive response. Next, the pupils act out scenes during which they acquire skills and strengthen their readiness to be assertive. Next, the people who play the roles each

talk about how they felt in a given situation. Later, the participants reflect together on the behaviour of individual actors. The last issue that is discussed during the training is the work on building an assertive internal dialogue. After the students learn about the role of internal dialogue, the teacher encourages them to analyse internal conversations in order to continue to learn how to replace anti-assertive messages with pro-assertive ones. The teacher assigns homework that ends the training – self-observation and self-control and the use of skills in private life. It is recommended to organise a meeting after several weeks in order to provide support in case of failure, dispel doubts and share the joy of successes.

The acquisition of assertiveness competence is fostered by experiences that evoke certain emotions. In this way, the individual is convinced to reflect on changing their own actions. It is worth using art therapy activities to develop assertiveness, especially drama classes, as well as visual and musical creation. These give students the opportunity to experience different social situations by playing different roles. Lessons of this type stimulate the ability to express oneself consciously, in a way that is still being shaped and perfected during the art therapy workshop. This way, participants can present their opinions confidently, but without violating the rules of culture and offending others. Another factor that contributes to the liberation of assertiveness are literary texts. Contact with literary works contributes to the student's processing of themselves, which leads to positive changes in behaviour, beliefs under the influence of the negative or positive experiences, and the misfortunes of the characters in the text. Bibliotherapy with elements of drama is helpful for the development of this ability. During the classes, the student has the opportunity to learn about their weaknesses in relations with others, to develop the ability to show feelings and oneself and to constructively resolve conflicts.

I also suggest, on the basis of poetic license, a few tips that may be useful for working with students in every class to create a strong foundation of lower social skills for assertiveness.

First, let young people be free in whether and how they speak. There should be room for discussion and freedom of speech. Students will feel the taste of freedom but will also be open to relationships with others. They can signalise issues that are important to them, problems and subjects for conversations. It is worthwhile to organise such activities so that each student can express their opinions on a specific subject, even if they do not have their own opinions, they learn about the opinions of others. This teaches active listening, tolerance, acceptance, respect and trust.

Second, let the students talk as often as possible about their own ways of working and learning. The pupils, talking about themselves, open themselves up to others. This information may be extremely important for the pedagogue, as it helps to

make an accurate pedagogical diagnosis. The teacher can use any methods, means and therapies that awaken and develop the student. Various school events, class events, events, excursions, clubs, etc. are good opportunities to "say something about yourself."

Third, it is worth teaching students the art of wise self-evaluation (asking for advice from colleagues, parents and teachers). Proper self-evaluation is a very difficult art – it should be as adequate as possible – not too low, but also not too high. Teaching adequate self-assessment requires a lot of effort from the teacher. They should, above all, use praise, but in a moderate amount, as well as give reasons for the praise. They should give each student constructive criticism. Methods to check other students' opinions about what they think about X or Y are also helpful. It is useful to apply elements of self-assessment and justification in tests and trials.

Fourth, teach people the ability to analyse and evaluate others' conversations. A child learns to think constructively, their worldview is broadened by listening to the conversations of others. It is worthwhile to analyse their statements together with the charges on an ongoing basis. Discussions about literary texts or art are helpful, forcing students to reflect on whether or not they like a work, and to put themselves in the role of the protagonist.

Fifth, promote and shape a culture of discussion, to develop the ability to defend and negotiate positions and opinions. This is very difficult, but very valuable. It is desirable to organise a discussion wisely, to explore its principles and culture. The communication skills of the students are then improved. Discussion forces participants to adopt a specific position, to argue it, to listen to counter-arguments, to work out a compromise or a common position. It also teaches the art of assertive behaviour. Difficult and controversial topics should be tackled, but they should be interesting for students, in order to familiarise them with the art of talking about difficult issues, with the ability to understand oneself and the surrounding world. Students acquire the ability to recognise and name the states and emotions they feel. This makes it easier to find the source of one's own feelings and promotes understanding of the emotions of others, as well as developing emphatic thinking. Discussion is the basis for interaction and cooperation skills. During the discussion, the teacher should not only encourage the students to continue and develop their statements with their voices, but also with their facial expressions, postures and gestures. New topics for conversations and discussion that are of particular concern to young people can also be encouraged. The students should also be taught the art of patience, silence and appreciation of the values of sharing common silence. Paradoxically, such silence can be both meaningful and understandable.

Summary

The ability to act assertively is one of the postulates of contemporary pedagogical paradigms, to make a student a fully independent, mature and autonomous individual. Unfortunately, in the school reality, an individual who is easily influenced, dependent and humble is treated as a model. Students who demonstrate different attitudes are punished. These situations happen because it is easier and more convenient for teachers to shape a polite, submissive person who does not defend their rights. This is also due to the fact that few teachers have the ability to be assertive and show appropriate assertive behaviour. The article discusses the issue of students possessing this skill, which is extremely important for their further social functioning.

This article proposes several ways to develop assertive skills that can be used in any class, but that require extra work and time from the teacher. These methods do not require very much effort or material resources, but they are extremely satisfying when students manage to acquire this competence.

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