



Education and families experiencing the problem of domestic violence – between engagement and indifference

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Abstract:

Discussions about the support system for children experiencing violence have been taking place both on an international forum as well as locally in Poland. (Zmarzlik, 2011; Wójcik, 2013; Jarosz, 2007; Jarosz, 2008; Jarosz, 2018; Dąbrowska, 2012). The questions about who should undertake tasks in this area and what their scope and type should be are still unresolved. Individuals who work with abused children agree that teachers may be an important link in the support system due to their role. The purpose of the current study is to examine the tasks of the school in the context of the experience of children growing up in a family with a problem of domestic violence.

In contemporary discourses on preventing domestic violence against children, the active participation of the children themselves in creating solutions in this area is increasingly emphasized. Due to the participatory and emancipatory character of the project, the current research represents the paradigm of qualitative methodology and, within it, the assumptions of radical humanism. The final result is a description which includes answers to the above research questions and an analysis of legal and statutory actions aimed at social emancipation through education and participation of individuals experiencing domestic violence.

In light of international standards of support for abused children, education can and should play a significant support role. Education and participation are considered significant factors in the social emancipation of children – victims of domestic violence – and their families. However, in the perception of individuals experiencing violence, schools do not effectively fulfill their role in this respect. It seems that the place a teacher will take in the process of supporting abused children and their families will depend largely on how the teachers themselves define their own role, as well as on the appropriate legislative solutions for their education. I think that the curricula of teachers' studies should not only include obligatory exercises in cooperation procedures and communication skills workshops, but they should also address issues shaping active attitudes towards the situations the teachers will find themselves in over the course of their careers.

1. Introduction

For many years, the role of the parents in children's education has been a topic of discussion both in Poland and globally. Increasing prominence has been given to voices stating that parents need to be involved in their children's school's life and that their involvement should be facilitated by all those interested in democratizing society. Maria Mendel, who has been involved with this issue for many years, emphasizes that parents can be a significant resource in education, constituting a capital worthy of investment. (Mendel, 2019) Unfortunately, as the above author notes, *parents at school are not in their element, the school does not belong to them in even a small part though they work for it, maintain it and contribute to its good every day.* (Mendel, 2000, p. 70). In the opinion of the parents and teachers in the Parents in Education Association (*Stowarzyszenie Rodzice w Edukacji*), the reasons behind such an attitude are manifold. These include: – lack of communication skills – fear of the parents' involvement and the resulting excess of their proposals and expectations, as well as the



inability to manage parent teams – fear of losing authority before the parents and before society in general – maintaining the established stereotype that parents know little about education and upbringing and thus need to be instructed rather than engaged in equal dialogue – lack of skills, ideas, and creativity in involving parents in the process of their children’s education and upbringing – aversion to parents endemic in the school culture (Piotrowska-Gromniak, 2020). Concerns about cooperation are also expressed by the parents themselves. While they often complain about not having time to cooperate with schools, this could also be an excuse for their anxiety. The problem of reluctance to cooperate may intensify in families experiencing domestic violence. Families in which at least one of the parents exhibits violent behaviour often defend themselves against external interference. They perceive support from teachers as a threat, and forbid their children from talking about the family situation for fear of having their “secret” revealed.

The current study is an attempt to examine the tasks of the school in the context of the experience of a child growing up in a family with a problem of violence. Referring to the experiences of adults who have experienced domestic violence in their childhood, I will try to answer the question of how they perceive the reactions and engagement of the school environment and the type and extent of support they have received. Within the context of the study’s participants’ experiences, I will attempt to reflect on the importance of the school in the process of supporting abused children and the location of this type of family in the school environment. The basic research question I addressed was whether, and to what extent, does the school fulfil the tasks of protecting an abused child. The following specific research problems have been formulated to answer this question:

What are the experiences of children experiencing domestic violence?

What are their experiences of the support they have received?

What were the reactions of the school environment to the violence the children experienced?

What kind of support has been provided to the people surveyed by the school staff?

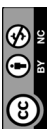
What place should the school assume in the process of helping a child experiencing domestic violence and their family?

In order to answer these research questions, I have examined the legal and statutory regulations in force in this area and assessed their actual implementation in the light of the interviews conducted with people who have experienced domestic violence in their childhood.

2. Research perspective

Due to the participatory and emancipatory character of the current research, the presented concept places it in the paradigm of qualitative methodology, and within it, of radical humanism. The proponents of this trend assume that reality is socially constructed, though in a way that is invisible, impossible to be known, and thus to change by the average member of society. *The role of science is therefore to expose the false traps of collective consciousness in order to show people the paths to liberation or to create innovative solutions.* (Kostera, 2003, p. 17). According to this paradigm, science can play a significant role in the process of emancipation of oppressed groups by publicising their problems and also by raising their own awareness and actively involving them in the struggle for their rights. Contemporary discourses on the prevention of domestic violence against children increasingly emphasize the active and fundamental participation of the children themselves in the process of fighting for their rights. The Report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that *in the phenomenon of violence, the critical point is its experience, therefore, children – their positions and experiences – should be involved in conceptualizing, promoting, and formulating actions* (Jarosz & Michalak, 2018, p. 34). Considering the above statement, the current project attempted to take into account the perspective of people who have experienced domestic violence as children in order to present a picture of the experience of the violence as well as the received support.

Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (qtd. in Kostera, 2003, p. 26) explain that qualitative research is best suited for exploratory studies of understudied phenomena. In addition, it can be valuable in studying hidden or little-known aspects of already well-researched phenomena or to gain new insights into something that is considered to be well-known. Subjective experiences of child victims of domestic violence and the forms of support they obtained can certainly be considered a perspective that is rarely taken up in research on this topic.



In order to achieve the above aims, the biographical method has been employed. It allows for analyzing specific problems against the background of the participants' life narratives (Żurko, 1995, p. 100). According to J. Douglas, the intersubjective character of the social world requires seeing "the reality of many perspectives." Therefore, conducting research "inside out" and focusing on individual everyday experience is the best way to study the reality of the social world. All topics relevant for the participants should be considered. Responses emerge gradually as the participants talk about their experiences and desires and as they reveal their knowledge about themselves, the world, and other people. The results of these studies are descriptive and take the form of a narrative based on conceptual categories specific to the participants (Malewski, 1997, p. 17). Biographical research is usually considered as a variant of individual case studies. Similar terms include: psychobiographical research (Bühler 1999), biographical-narrative research (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2013), narrative research (Kubinowski, 2010), and the biographical approach (Lalak, 2010). Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac stresses that it is difficult to speak about the biographical method as a single, coherent approach. This is due both to the multiplicity of biographical perspectives, i.e., the goals set by the researcher and the way the data from the biographies are treated (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2011 pp. 9-16). The current study follows Denzin's (1990, pp. 4-6) concept of a qualitative approach to the biographical method. An important feature of this concept is the fact that it allows for knowing how an individual experience is lived out. A biographical story should show how the surrounding reality has influenced the study participant's consciousness, attitudes, aspirations, or opinions. However, it is less about collecting opinions and more about reconstructing the meanings that the participants assign to reality on a cognitive, emotional, and moral level. Reflecting the subjective perspective of the participants – individuals who have experienced domestic violence in childhood – the current study can be treated as a kind of emancipatory therapy. Returning to the past and being granted the possibility of verbalizing painful experiences became an opportunity for liberation for my interlocutors. D. Demetrio (2000, p. 11) also strongly emphasizes the therapeutic role of biography: *the reproduction of images from the past makes the storyteller feel better, while the story itself becomes a method of better knowledge and a form of liberation at the same time*. According to Krzysztof Rubacha, it is important to stimulate insight into one's own experiences, which often has therapeutic significance. It allows for structuring and analyzing one's own experiences, giving them an appropriate rank in the perspective of life and developing self-awareness as a result (Rubacha, 2008). Thematization of experience causes that which has not yet been considered to be reflected upon, and the verbalization and conceptualization of one's own experience supports the development of self-awareness. It is not a matter of focusing on objective facts, but on the meanings that the participants assign to these facts and the ways in which these meanings function in their experience.

In order to collect empirical data, autobiographical-narrative interviews were carried out. They are sometimes associated with open, in-depth interviews, but also with free, undirected interviews as described by Steinar Kvale (2004). Autobiographical-narrative interviews are based on a story about what happened. However, the narrative itself is understood more broadly: as a retrospective creation of meanings, shaping and organizing of past experience. Thus, a narrative interview is more than just retrospection. The narrative becomes a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a significant whole. (Januszewska, 2010).

Usually, the first stage and simultaneously the consequence of a narrative interview is biography work, while its continuation sometimes becomes identity work. As an inner activity of the mind and psyche, biography work facilitates better self-understanding as well as the discovery of the mechanisms of mental growth and alternatives to current activities. The interpretative work, which results from the recalled memories, allows for organizing one's thinking about oneself and thus to face the difficulties and consequences of what happened in the past. In turn, identity work is a deepening of biographical and interpretative activities, often being a consequence of becoming conscious of a trajectory of suffering (Golczyńska-Grondas, Grondas, 2017, pp. 29-47).

Several people who have experienced domestic violence in their childhood participated in the current study. The context involved the criteria of inclusion into the category of people who experienced domestic violence in childhood and general categories such as place (the Polish *Trójmiasto*) and time (second half of 2019). These selection criteria allowed for the emergence of a group of several participants. In the first phase of the interview, the participants were asked the following question: Could you tell me about your experiences of domestic violence and the support you have received? Supplementary questions were formulated as follows: Did your teachers suspect that you were struggling with such problems? What were their reactions to your



situation? Did someone at the school offer you help? How did this help look? The research was conducted between August and September 2019 among adult children of alcoholics (*dorośle dzieci alkoholików, DDA*) who have experienced domestic violence in addition to their parent's addiction. Owing to the participants' long-term acquaintance with the author of the text, the interviews took place in an atmosphere of openness and trust. Teresa Bauman stresses that *the most important role in stimulating the narrative seems to be played by interdependence (the meeting and the conversation that underpins it changes both people involved), integrity, and community (the spiritual bond formed by the atmosphere of encounter and dialogue;* (Bauman & Pilch, 2001). Taking into account the above indications as well as the participants' traumatic experiences, all interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes or in other places ensuring peace and privacy.

Transcriptions of the interviews served as the data for the analysis. Monika Kostera underscores that qualitative methods allow for a way of description that is close to the participants' experience. One of their strengths is their cognitive potential, which allows the researcher to genuinely understand the studied reality and even to experience it in a sense. (Kostera, 2003). Due to the above assumptions, the participants' statements constituted a significant part of the description of the analytical categories outlined in the study, the idea being that the voice of the children experiencing violence should be heard and that they should have a chance to hear themselves. The key categories that were used for the analysis of the empirical material were the participants' lived experiences related to:

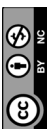
- the domestic violence they have experienced
- the reaction of their school environments to their situation
- the self-reflection they have undertaken and their readiness for further biographical/therapeutic work on the type and extent of the support they have received
- the support they have been offered or the lack thereof.

The designations referring to the transcription are written in brackets: W: 24 or M: 26 is the age of the woman or man participating in the study, In: 3, p. 1 is the interview number and page from which the quote comes.

3. The school's tasks in relation to abused child

The purpose of the current study is an attempt to examine the tasks of the school in the context of the experience of children growing up in a family with a problem of violence. Family experiences are an important developmental factor for the child's identity. They determine not only the quality of the childhood but also of the adult life. Research in some Western European countries shows that a negative family history (involving stress, exploitation, abuse, and parental instability) increases vulnerability to subsequent interpersonal trauma. Additionally, the perception of one's own family as unsupportive is associated with lower self-esteem and self-worth. The combination of insufficient resources and conflicting relationships in one's own family may result in a specific passivity in seeking help outside it (Dębska-Cenian & Retowski, 2008). Therefore, I think it is worth considering who can take on the task of protecting and bringing up the child in a situation of family dysfunction. Can a teacher become an ally of the abused child by virtue of their role?

Persons working with abused children agree that due to the functions they serve, teachers can be an important link in the support system (Jarosz, 1998, 1999, pp. 202-206; Pitila, 2008, pp. 103-110). The role and tasks of the school in this area are defined by the Act on the Educational System, the Teacher's Charter Act, the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 13 September 2011 on the "Blue Sheet" (*Niebieska Karta*) procedure and specimen forms of the "Blue Sheet," as well as the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 17 November 2010 on the principles of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools, and institutions. The responsibility of teachers, educators, and other pedagogical staff as well as of non-teachers in helping abused children also results from other legal regulations – among others, the Code of Criminal Procedure – Article 304, Criminal Code – Article 162, Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence, Article 12, Civil Procedure Code – Article 572, Convention on the Rights of the Child (Kita, 2011, pp. 69-81). The report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child lists teachers as a professional group particularly suited to providing professional assistance to abused children. Therefore, it includes them in the provision on the need to build and maintain the professional status of persons and services working with children by equipping them with appropriate qualifications, knowledge, and skills, as well as education in the field of children's rights (Jarosz, 2018). Therefore, according to the regulations in force, the teacher



not only can help an abused child but is also obligated to do so. The legislator gives the school staff the necessary powers in this respect and calls for assigning a high profile to the activities they undertake, as well as for future educators to be equipped with appropriate qualifications, knowledge, and skills.

There are many arguments for the importance of the school environment in the support system for abused children. One of the most significant is the fact that the school staff has direct and systematic contact with relatively large numbers of children from different social backgrounds. This position gives them the opportunity to systematically observe the children and thus to notice concerning symptoms in their behaviour. Sometimes, due to close emotional contact, teachers receive direct information about the violence that their pupils experience in their family homes. Teachers also have the opportunity to contact children's families, which gives them the opportunity to obtain information about their family and its individual members, which is important in detecting domestic violence. The social perception of the school as a formal institution responsible for the care for and upbringing of children is also not without significance. It is often this factor which motivates different people close to the family (relatives, neighbors, etc.) to inform the teachers and pedagogues about the family's disturbing behaviour. Professional assistance of the school staff and reporting cases to the relevant institutions can increase their official number, thus further contributing to their detection.

Despite the numerous arguments for the teacher's significant role in the diagnosis of children experiencing domestic violence, there are doubts as to whether the school staff is actually using their potential in this respect. Research in this area shows that the school does not always perform its function of effectively protecting abused children. Teachers are often not aware of their tasks in this area or are afraid to take actions that may increase the feelings of shame, humiliation, or fear in their students. In small communities, the teachers' fear revolves around further, repeated harm to the child when the procedure to prevent violence is launched. Concerns about retaliation by the perpetrator – especially in small communities – may thus be an obstacle. Responsibility is another concern. Teachers doubt whether they have the right to interfere in a family's affairs. Their concerns may be exacerbated by permissive opinions of Polish society on the use of physical punishment in upbringing. The school staff often does not know what action to take in situations of suspected domestic violence against children, nor the appropriate procedures in force in this area (Czyżewska, 2008, pp. 75-99, 2010, pp. 139-149). These circumstances may be one of the reasons for the emergence of so-called evasive behaviour, taking the form of a specific syndrome called NIMBY. The mechanism of this phenomenon consists in not perceiving problems or denying their existence, more or less consciously. (Jarosz, 1999, pp. 202-206). J. Sokołowska draws similar conclusions in her studies on street children's perceptions of school. They emphasize that the teachers do not know their problems and that they often perceive them in a stereotypical way. The most frequently presented attitude was one of indifference or aversion. (Sokołowska, 2010, pp. 115-127).

4. Teachers and domestic violence against children – results of own research

In this part of the text, I will try to answer the question of how adults who have experienced domestic violence in their childhood perceive the responses and commitment of their school environments to their experiences, as well as the type and extent of support they have received. Basing on their experiences, I will try to reflect on the importance of the school in the process of helping abused children and their families. The following analytical categories were distinguished based on an analysis of the empirical data:

- The participants' attitudes towards the support they have been offered or the lack thereof
- The participants made numerous mentions of the forms of domestic violence they have experienced and its consequences. However, due to the scope and length of this article, they were not included in the analysis.

Most of the respondents believed that their teachers did not notice or tried not to notice the violence they were experiencing. In their opinion, neither the teachers nor other school staff were involved in any form of assistance, nor did they attempt to establish a relationship with them. *I was doing well at school, I liked to learn, I wanted to be good at something, but my parents didn't see it, they were busy with their problems, dad thought it was stupid. The day before the final exams, my father came home drunk, and the shoving started. I went to the exams all shaken up, I was in so much pain and I was so ashamed I cried over the paper, and as a result I failed. Not because I wasn't prepared, but because I couldn't handle my emotions. I turned in a blank sheet. The Polish*



teacher who knew me for so many years didn't know why. I think she was afraid, and for the sake of peace and quiet, she didn't try to look into it. To this day, I remember my surprise, because all the time I had this inner conviction that it is the teacher's duty to intervene in such situations [W8, K, L 28, p. 41].

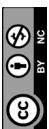
In the respondents' perception, most teachers mainly focused on the transfer of knowledge, limiting the upbringing process to the imposing of restrictions on students in order to motivate them to study. The basic instruments of this strategy are failing grades and negative feedback. They often represent an unsuccessful attempt to mobilize the children to work and improve their behavior. It seems that the teachers were not aware of the children's real problems, often resulting from their family situations: *I was called names, beaten, I didn't want to live. Nobody knew what was wrong with me and I didn't want to talk about it. I couldn't concentrate on anything, learning was a nightmare for me. My math teacher only made things worse. She said I'm lazy, that I don't want to learn. I can't forgive her for that* [W7, K L 23, p.7]. According to Mariusz Granosik, children experience the restrictions imposed on them at school as stressful punishment, which is often a source of frustration, a feeling of injustice and being misunderstood. This results in becoming discouraged from studying (Granosik et al. (2019). Monika Czyżewska calls the phenomenon of “not noticing” the children's harm the *bystander effect* (Czyżewska, 2010).

From the participants' narratives, it appears that some of the teachers showed a so-called indirect reaction to violence. Its essence is to seek a solution to the problem in cooperation with specialists, to pass the matter on to other school staff, or to take independent action in the form of material help, instructive conversation with the child's parents, or comforting the child (Jarosz 1998, Jarosz, 1999, pp. 202-206). A significant number of the participants noted that their teachers saw their problems and were aware of their origin, though they did not take any direct action. Their activities were usually of an ad hoc nature and were limited mainly to material aid. *My homeroom teacher was a woman with a sensitive heart and angelic kindness. She suspected that things were bad at home. I lived in a small town where nothing could be hidden. Everybody knew Daddy drank a lot and I guess they figured he was aggressive. Sometimes I used to come to school without sandwiches, I rarely went on class trips. Mrs. Kasia sometimes arranged some lunches and trips. Sometimes she tried to talk to me, but somehow there was a lack of atmosphere and peace* [W1, K L 22, p.1].

Those participants who received substantial support from the school were the relatively least numerous group. In their case, the teachers took direct action, which became a factor inspiring change for them and also for their parents. *Mom often went to school and talked to her [the teacher] for a long time. Contrary to my fears, our situation slowly began to change. Dad continued to drink and tried to beat us, but Mom became different, as if stronger, she met with my teacher several more times and then she started going to therapy, [...] I don't know if it was her [the teacher's] doing but once I found a note in Mom's purse with the addresses of support groups for codependent people* [W3, K, L 26, p.3]. This image of a teacher stays in line with the definition of support of abused children formulated by persons constructing standards of counteracting domestic violence against children (these standards put emphasis on the emergence of an in-depth relationship with the child and their family, creating an atmosphere of trust and motivating change).

Considering the experience of the victims of domestic violence, it must be concluded that the respondents did not receive sufficient support from school environments. The greatest cause for concern lies in the number of interventions. In the participants' perception, most teachers did not take any action to protect an abused child. In their opinion, teachers seemed to overlook child victims of domestic violence. They rarely engaged in any form of support towards the child and their family. The type of support received is also questionable. Most teachers reacted indirectly to the violence experienced by the child. Teacher support was generally limited to financial support for the child (which included, for the most part, free meals) or referring the child to other school or specialist staff. Only a few of the teachers tried to have a conversation with the child abuse victims. In the participants' opinion, the teachers had a tendency to distance themselves from issues of upbringing, focusing primarily on teaching. Some of them tried to solve problems by disciplining their students or ignoring them.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the school is not effectively fulfilling its tasks of protecting abused children. The results of the current study provoke a discussion on what the teachers are actually obliged to do and the type of reaction to violence against children that would be most appropriate. The analysis found that the majority of teachers showed indirect reactions to the violence experienced by the participants in their childhood. The teachers in this group referred children in need of help to other educators working on the



school premises or primarily focused on material assistance. In the subject literature, the opinions on the indicated reactions of school environments to child abuse are divided. The scope and types of actions taken are controversial. Some researchers believe that pedagogues are particularly predisposed to the initial identification of cases of domestic violence against children (Jarosz, 1998, 1999, pp. 202-206; Pitula, 2008, pp. 103-110). However, people who create procedures for counteracting child abuse in the family recommend that interventions involving the court, police, or the prosecutor's office should be initiated after attempting to change the parents' behavior towards the child and should rather be a consequence of their lack of cooperation with the school (Czyżewska, 2008; Kita, 2011, pp. 69-81). Proponents of this option believe that the teacher is able to change the behavior of parents towards their child, as teachers are particularly predisposed to do so by virtue of their function. This is undoubtedly supported by the fact that the teacher is familiar with the child and may gain their trust. The teacher's actions can also provide vital support for a non-violent parent who, due to the long process of victimization, cannot protect the child. Cooperation with the parent who is the perpetrator of violence may turn out to be much more difficult, although cases of conversations with parent perpetrators appear in the literature (see Karasowska, Rymaszewska, 2011, pp. 36-54; Kanios, 2016). Undoubtedly, motivating for change is an important element in the process of helping abusive families, but there is a doubt whether the teacher is really able to undertake such tasks in addition to teaching and education.

I think it is worth considering the adequacy of the undertaken forms of support. For the majority of the participants, domestic violence was associated with the problem of alcohol addiction of one of the parents. Abuse and poverty are the main sources of stress for children from abusive families. *We were dirt poor, often we didn't have food, when I was older I started to make some money on the side, but most of the time I didn't go out, I was ashamed of my appearance, window shopping was my only option, we went to school on foot, sometimes my aunt brought us sweets, I still remember their taste* [W1, K L 22, p.1]. In this situation, material support seems to be fully justified. Material support, despite its limited nature, can undoubtedly have a significant impact on the quality of a child's life, because, as Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska rightly notes, poverty is a form of deprivation that prevents the child from participating in society and functioning according to an accepted pattern, and it becomes an important initiating factor of the process of social exclusion (Szczepska-Pustkowska, 2010; cf. Boryczko, Frysztański, Kotlarska-Michalska, Mendel. 2016; Kopczyńska-Sikorska, Szyszko, 1999). Taking action to meet the most elementary needs of the child is justified, but limiting the assistance to financial support will not be able to counteract child abuse. Also, it does not include processes aimed at changing the situation of the family struggling with domestic violence.

The participants' narrations also suggest that the lack of psychological support skills is a factor hindering the process of helping abused children. The participants stated that the attempts made by the teachers to encourage them to talk or to seek support amongst school staff were not effective. *Mrs. Kasia sometimes arranged some lunches and trips. Sometimes she tried to talk to me, but somehow there was a lack of atmosphere and peace* [W1, K L 22, p.1]. Undoubtedly, talking to or trying to "refer" a child can be effective ways of support, provided that they are used correctly. It is not easy to gain the trust of a child who has learned that no one can be trusted, it requires the appropriate attitude but also specific skills. Conversation is undoubtedly an essential tool in the process of helping abused children, provided that the teacher can prepare and implement it properly, both in terms of duration and setting. Having adequate knowledge and skills in organizing, initiating, and maintaining a space for conversations seems necessary. Encouraging children to seek specialist treatment requires gaining their trust. Also, the process of referral needs to be appropriately prepared.

The research seems to indicate that the difficulties of helping abused children may result from obstacles on the part of the children themselves. Shame and humiliation associated with being abused by the closest relatives often contribute to hiding family relationships: *"dad was usually calm, but when he got drunk he seemed possessed; he beat us senseless and screamed that he'd take us out; one time it got so bad, the ambulance had to come over. I remember that the doctor asked me what happened, but I was afraid to tell the truth, mom always told me not to tell anyone about what was going on, because dad would get sober and it would be fine; unfortunately, nothing has changed* [W7, K, L 23, p.4]. The feeling of shame and humiliation makes children conceal their family situation also from their peers: *I invited my friends home and my dad came back home unexpectedly sooner, I was so ashamed. He started bothering my friends, screaming that I was wasting my time partying, it was horrifying. I started explaining that my dad was at a birthday party and came home slightly drunk, but my friends noticed that I was lying and left soon; we never brought this situation up, and I never invited anyone*

home again. My teachers seemed to notice something and called for my mom a few times, but I kept hiding the truth [W9, K, L25, p.4].

Hiding the situation at home protects children from shame, but removes their chances of receiving support. The participants reported often feeling conflicted. On the one hand, they wanted no one to know their domestic situation. On the other hand, they hoped that someone would discover their “secret” and help them: *On hot days I used to wear long-sleeved shirts, to cover my bruises and cuts. Sometimes you could see band-aids or bandages slipping from under my sleeve when I raised my hand during classes. My homeroom teacher noticed my clothes and band-aids, but she didn't bother to ask me about anything. Her face showed that she didn't want to interfere. She always tried to behave as if nothing ever happened. My dropping grades also gave her no reason to think about what was really happening. On the one hand, I was glad she wasn't doing anything about it, but on the other hand, I think she should have helped me, as opposed to pretending she doesn't see anything* [W7, K, L 23, p.7].

Considering the participants' ambivalence, it is worth noting the importance of the teacher's initiative, active approach, and subtlety towards the child. In the context of the aforementioned issues, I think bears remembering that the teacher's attitude can be just as important as their way of intervening. Therefore, teacher education should cover social competences in addition to knowledge and skills. Maria Mendel, who has been involved in family and school work for many years, stresses that a teacher can be an ally of a child and their family, but this requires openness and cooperation, as effective support is neither simple nor easy, it requires sacrifice and effort, as well as mutual understanding and respect (Mendel, 2007).

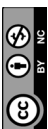
5. Generalizations and conclusions

The process of supporting abused children is not easy. The results of research on the importance of the school environment in this regard are not encouraging. According to people who have experienced domestic violence in their childhood, the school does not perform its tasks effectively. Teachers either do not react to the situation of children experiencing domestic violence, or they take inadequate measures. Considering the scope and forms of the provided support, it should be assumed that teachers are not fully prepared to take on the task of helping an abused child. The difficulties of tackling domestic violence against children may result from obstacles on the part of the children themselves. Shame and humiliation associated with being abused by the closest relatives often contribute to hiding family relationships: Hiding the situation at home protects children from shame, but removes their chances of receiving support. On a macro scale, a factor hindering support for abused children is the social acceptance of physical punishment in the process of upbringing and the lack of response towards it. Recent research on this subject shows that it is still an accepted way of correcting a child's behavior (Jarosz, Michalak, 2018). It is recognized as an effective and acceptable educational method by almost every fifth Pole (Jarosz, 2018). The participants' statements seem to confirm that casual witnesses of domestic violence against children rarely react.

In the context of the diagnosed issues, it is worth considering the recommended actions to be taken to ensure that the rights of abused children are actually respected and their voices are reflected in strategies for preventing domestic violence against children. The presented possible changes to the system of support for child victims of violence refer mainly to recommendations addressed to the broadly understood school environment, assuming that the teachers, due to the tasks they perform, may play a significant role in the process of social emancipation of the abused child and their family.

Fighting for the rights of an abused child. From education and participation to emancipation

Fighting for children's rights is part of global and European child protection strategies. In 1989, Poland signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The document contains a number of recommendations concerning the duties of the state and education to prevent domestic violence against children and stresses the need to create state regulations on child protection and to take appropriate social and educational measures in this area. (Jarosz, 2018, pp. 26-31). Despite the recommendations and actions taken, the phenomenon of social consent to child beating and the lack of reaction from witnesses of violence are still an enormous problem. The World Report on Violence Against Children, published in 2016, states that every year, more than 50 thousand children worldwide are killed and 1-2 million children must be hospitalized because of injuries they have suffered as a result of acts of violence by their closest family members (Jarosz, Michalak, 2018, p.83). Ewa



Jarosz stresses that all violence against children is a violation of their rights, and the essence of violence lies in the abuse by parents (guardians) of their position and strength, the use of the child for their own needs and personal, often unconscious, “interests” (Jarosz, 2015, p. 15). In Poland, Janusz Korczak was the precursor of the social discourse on the rights of abused children (Niewęglowski, 2013, pp. 99-115). Korczak, an exceptional educator, opposed all forms of violence against children, taking into account not only the developmental but also the ethical aspects of the issue. He stressed that abuse violates the dignity and humanity of children. Giving space to children’s voices and participation was present in all his forms of work, from serving as a journal editor to being in the Peer Court and the Student Self-government (*Samorząd Uczniowski*). In modern discourses, one can observe a return not only to continuations of Korczak’s activism for children’s rights to freedom from pain and violence, but also to his concept of the child as a subject of their own actions. Increasingly radical ways of eliminating child abuse are being sought, while at the same time, the need for action based on the participation of the child and their family is being highlighted.

Abusive families in education – from vision to reality

In light of the current standards, school and (broadly understood) education can and should play an important role in supporting children who experience domestic violence. The role of education and its importance is mentioned in all international and national strategies for the protection of abused children. In Europe, one of the most important documents concerning this issue was the *Responses to violence in everyday life in a democratic society* report which was carried out between 2002-2004. The guidelines set out by the report postulated that state action should be based on the integration and partnership of all actors involved in building the system of support for abused children, including family and school. Possibilities of working with the family were indicated, ranging from developing the so-called positive parenthood, through supporting the parents and their education and home visit programs to early childhood education programs. Subsequent strategies, apart from the postulates concerning the elimination of all forms of violence, emphasized the promotion of children’s participation and taking their voices into account when constructing strategies for protective activities (Jarosz, 2018, pp. 81-1130.) The current strategy, which continues the idea of building a Europe for and with children, has been conceived as a strategy to develop the protection of children’s rights following the notion of *children’s rights as human rights*. It was proposed that children’s participation in the struggle for their rights should be implemented not only by listening to them but also by gradually developing a culture of respect for their views. (Jarosz, 2008, pp.123-124).

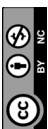
A paradigm of protection measures based on partnership with families has been adopted in most European countries. It is proposed that working towards abolishing violence should be done “with families” and not “against abusive families”. An important role has been assigned to education in this area. Teachers are named as people who should initiate cooperation and motivate towards change. However, according to the people who experienced domestic violence in their childhood, schools do not effectively perform its tasks in this respect. School employees are rarely involved in the situation of an abused pupil and their family. Parents also avoid contacting schools, do not trust the help they are offered, and often perceive it as a threat. In conclusion, families struggling with domestic violence are in a difficult position when it comes to schooling. It seems that the teachers’ involvement in the process of supporting abused children and their families will depend, to a large extent, on the appropriate legislative solutions concerning teacher education and how the teachers themselves define their role. I believe that in addition to the obligatory workshops on cooperation procedures and communication skills, the curriculum of teaching studies should include issues that shape active attitudes towards the existing reality. The fate of thousands of abused children and their families depends on the competence of future educators, as well as their disagreement with the present world.

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