

SPECIFICITY AND CAUSES OF SCHOOL PHOBIA IN CHILDREN AND TEACHERS' ACTIONS

BARBARA GRZYB, BEATA PITUŁA, AGATA KAŁAT

Abstract: *The article presents the problem of school phobia in the context of the need to rethink it on the basis of new research findings on the subject. Moreover, the increasing scale of the problem implies the need to look for new solutions, also of a systemic nature. The text therefore refers to and critically evaluates synthetic approaches to the problem proposed by researchers. An important part of the study is a presentation of teachers' and students' attitudes towards anxiety and ways to limit its consequences for the fulfilment of the role of a student. It concludes with recommendations for pedagogical practice in order to eliminate the phenomenon of school phobia and limit its individual and social consequences.*

Keywords: *school phobia, student, teacher, anxiety*

Introduction

The school environment allows the child to experience a wide range of situations and sensations, from the most positive to the most problematic and even negative. However, modern education is increasingly recognising the problems of pupils, sometimes referred to as school difficulties, sometimes more generally as anxiety, unjustified fear of the teacher, the subject or peers. In such circumstances, the question arises as to the source of these reactions, since fear is the loss of a sense of security, which for a child is an extremely important factor in its proper development. This observation is confirmed by Regulska, who points out that a sense of security "is one of the most important psychological

needs and is of great importance for normal human development. It is expressed through the avoidance of situations that cause fear, distress and a sense of threat. Security involves a desire for stability and predictability and for protection from significant people, so people close to the child - parents, other family members, also educators from other environments (kindergarten, school) - play an important role in meeting this need¹.

Another issue is the child's sense of fear, which, as Ziółkowski writes, is sometimes a natural and desirable bodily response to danger. In some people, however, the intensity of anxiety in certain objectively safe situations can be so great that it interferes with normal functioning².

¹ A. Rogulska, (2014). Zagrożone poczucie bezpieczeństwa u uczniów a zjawisko fobii szkolnej. [w:] L. Buller (red.), Socjotechniczne aspekty bezpieczeństwa w szkole, PTS, Warszawa s. 88.

² P. Ziółkowski, (2020). Fobia u dzieci w wieku szkolnym. Nauka i Społeczeństwo. Przegląd nauk społecznych, technicznych, medycznych i pedagogicznych, Nr 1, T. 1, s. 65.

Thus, from the perspective of the child, in the role of a learner, but also of the situations that trigger his or her anxiety, this dysfunctional picture of his or her functioning in the educational establishment is sometimes referred to as school phobia, first described by Broadwin³.

Heyne and Rollings, however, point out that school phobia is one of the anxiety (neurotic) disorders and is related to the school environment and demands. The phenomenon of school phobia consists in reacting with a very strong fear that is disproportionate to the real threat. It manifests itself in the avoidance of situations related to the object of the fear, which can be a major obstacle to daily functioning in the school environment⁴. In a slightly different, narrower sense, school phobia is nothing more than a refusal to go to school, accompanied by a strong fear of school, which can occur at any point in the school career⁵. So that it can be said that each of the events that the child experiences, with a negative tinge to say the least, constitutes a specific area of investigation for parents, teachers and psychologists, in order to diagnose the causes of school phobia and to counteract its destructive consequences.

When diagnosing school phobia, the symptoms externalised by the child are particularly important. The main symptoms

of school phobia that parents should pay attention to include somatic symptoms such as abdominal pain, bladder pain, nausea, vomiting, headache, panic attacks, fainting, loss of appetite, increased temperature, etc. They usually come on suddenly and are signalled by the child in the evening or in the morning before going to school⁶. The second area of behaviour specific to school phobia is the overt experience of fear of school⁷. Even if it is possible to prepare the child for leaving home, the mere thought of school will intensify these worrying symptoms. Unfortunately, in these circumstances, parents are faced with a rather difficult task, because if the child's behaviour becomes more frequent, the first decision should be to visit the family doctor. All too often, however, the diagnosis that parents receive is not always a diagnosis of school phobia, but merely a medical diagnosis of the symptoms.

An important aspect of a reliable diagnosis of the causes of school phobia is a thorough analysis of the peculiarities of the child's family environment, parental attitudes, family atmosphere and the nature of relations between its members. According to Ziółkowski, the overprotectiveness of parents and excessive fear for the child's health and life are of particular importance, which leads to the creation of hypothetically dangerous situations and events for the child and increases his fear of the world and

³ T., Broadwin, (1932). A contribution to the study of truancy. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. 2(3), pp. 253-259; za: M. Dąbkowska, (2007), *Identyfikacja podłoża odmowy uczęszczania do szkoły w opinii dzieci i ich rodziców*. *Psychiatria i Psychologia Kliniczna*, Nr 7, (2), s. 77.

⁴ D. Heyne, S. Rollings, (2008). *Niechęć do szkoły. Jak pomóc dziecku, które opuszcza lekcje i wagaruje*. Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk; za: A. Rogulska, (2014). *Zagrożone poczucie bezpieczeństwa u uczniów ... op. cit.*, s. 88.

⁵ . Kosiarska, (2007). *Zaburzenia emocjonalne u dzieci w młodszy wieku szkolnym*. *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio J. Paedagogia-Psychologia*. Vol. 20, s. 68, <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/> [dostęp: 02.03.2024r.].

⁶ A. Witkowska, S. Jabłoński, (1999). *Co to jest fobia szkolna?* *Edukacja i Dialog*, Nr 2, http://edukacjaidialog.pl/archiwum/1999.97/luty.146/co_to_jest_fobia_szkolna.813.html [dostęp: 07.11.2023r.]; U. Oszwa, (2007). *Dziecko z zaburzeniami rozwoju i zachowania w klasie szkolnej*. *Vademecum nauczycieli i rodziców*. Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls", Kraków, s. 59-64.

⁷ J. E. Mc Donald, G. Sheperd, (1976). *School phobia: An overview*. *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 14(4), pp. 291-306). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022440576900261> [dostęp: 07.11.2023r.]. P. Ziółkowski, (2020). *Fobia u dzieci w wieku szkolnym ...op. cit.*, 73.

people. This often leads to the child's expectation of failure and multiple threats from the environment. This becomes the reason for the child's self-image as weak and powerless in the face of the enormity of the world⁸. The author, like Eisen and Engler, also emphasises the importance of separation anxiety, which can take root in the lives of both the child and the parents, depriving them of mutual freedom, which has a definite negative effect on the young person's sense of security and increases school phobia⁹.

In addition to identifying the causes of school phobia, it is also important to recognise teachers' reactions to the issue of school phobia and the intervention strategies they use. It should be emphasised that although the performance of diagnostic tasks is just as important as teaching, educating or caring, it is in this area that the greatest shortcomings are found, due both to the lack of knowledge on the part of teachers and to the lack of time resulting from overloading with other tasks. However, it is precisely in the case of deficits, disharmony and various disorders in the child's development and school functioning that observation is crucial. It allows the teacher to detect early signs of phobia and to take immediate action to eliminate school anxiety. The first noticeable behaviour of a child that researchers emphasise should be paid attention to is the child's isolation from peers, which is often misdiagnosed as shyness. The second characteristic symptom is low self-esteem, which manifests itself in a lack of confidence in one's own abilities, resignation from taking on tasks and open

dependence on others - peers, colleagues or parents. This type of behaviour is usually accompanied by tearfulness, inability to cope with interpersonal relationships and frequent absences from school, with the consent of the parents. Although the symptoms described are clear and it seems easy for an attentive teacher to notice them, as Kkadam and Khudhair point out, teachers have too little knowledge about school phobia in primary school pupils to be able to diagnose the problem accurately¹⁰. Therefore, they suggest that any behaviour of a pupil that worries the teacher in any way should be the basis for referring the pupil to a pedagogue, a school psychologist or a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre, which will allow a valid diagnosis to be made and professional help to be provided to the pupil, but also support to be given to his parents and teachers in the implementation of educational tasks. Using this type of solution will allow to restore and secure a sense of security in the school environment and constant monitoring of the atmosphere and relationships in the peer group¹¹. Recommendations from professionals will form the basis for:

- taking action to integrate and build security in the classroom team,
- prevent social exclusion;
- provide psychological support for students who experience excessive anxiety in social situations, - provide space for students to express their feelings and opinions freely, careful monitoring of students' family situations,

⁸ P. Ziółkowski, (2020). Fobia u dzieci w wieku szkolnym ...op. cit., 73.

⁹ A. R. Eisen, L. B. Engler, (2006). Szkoła bez lęku. Jak wygrać z lękiem separacyjnym u dziecka? Wydawnictwo Helion, Gliwice; za: Ibidem, s. 73.

¹⁰ S.A.. Kkadam, S.H.Khudhair, (2022). Effectiveness of an Instructional Program for Teachers about Students' School Phobia at Primary Schools. Pakistan Journal of Medical & Health Science, Vol.

16 (03), p. 519,

<https://www.pjmhs.com/index.php/pjmhs/article/view/521> [dostęp: 07.11.2023r.].

¹¹ N. Perek, (2022). Fobia szkolna – objawy, czynniki wsparcia i ryzyka. Jak pomóc dziecku, które nie chce chodzić do szkoły? E-pedagogika, <https://epedagogika.pl/top-tematy/fobia-szkolna-objawy-czynniki-wsparcia-i-ryzyka.-jak-pomoc-dziecku-ktore-nie-chce-chodzic-do-szkoly-6439.html> [dostęp: 07.11.2023r.].

- providing students with access to supportive conversations with a school psychologist,
- taking care of the mental condition of teachers so that their fatigue does not translate into excessive demands on students,
- organizing meetings to support both teachers and parents in understanding the needs of teenagers¹².

All researchers of the problem emphasize the need to immediately provide professional care to children suffering from school phobia. Ignoring, not noticing or lack of interest in this problem often leads to irreversible, negative effects affecting the child's quality of life in the future. This is due to the persistence of disorders in the psychosomatic sphere: speech disorders, poor well-being, lack of self-confidence, abnormal personality

development and lack of subjectivity, consolidation of abnormal patterns in social relationships and the assumption of social roles, disorders in moral development, inability to cope with difficult situations, etc. In the educational sphere, in turn, reluctance to participate in school activities will result in a low level of effectiveness in acquiring knowledge and competences, as well as the accumulation of school failures¹³.

It is worth noting, however, that, according to Krzyżaniak and her co-authors, a child at school does not remain defenseless in the face of experienced fear. On the contrary, it spontaneously makes various attempts to reduce¹⁴ or remove it. However, following Karolczak-Biernacka, researchers indicate 9 categories confirming students' activity in minimizing this phenomenon¹⁵.

Table 1 Categories for reducing or removing anxiety

Category	Factors that remove and/or reduce anxiety in the child/student
Constructive task activity	limiting contact with the source of anxiety: "I don't study until the last moment";
Constructive substitute activity	undertaking other activities, e.g. contacts with friends;
Thought manipulation	e.g. belief in happiness, eliminating unpleasant thoughts;
Attention manipulation	focusing attention on other objects;
Value manipulation	reducing the importance of failures;
The "I" foundation	increasing self-confidence;
Intentional passivity	protraction;
Intentional relaxation activities	e.g. sleeping;
Mimowolne reakcje rozładowujące	laughter, jokes.

Source: own study, based on: B. Karolczak-Biernacka, (1992). *Lęk szkolny. Nowa Szkoła, Nr 9, s. 528-535*; za: Krzyżaniak, R. Lepka, B. Stawińska-Witoszyńska, M. Krzywińska-Wiewiorowska, J. Skommer, (2009). *Ocena lęku szkolnego u dzieci i młodzieży miasta Poznania. Problemy Higieny i Epidemiologii, Nr 90(1), s. 83.*

This synthesis of nine categories of children's management of anxiety shows possible

and often very effective attempts to reduce it. These mainly concern the pupil's

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Plewińska A. (2007). Konsekwencje lęku szkolnego. „Edukacja i Dialog”, 4, s. 54-59.

¹⁴ A. Krzyżaniak, R. Lepka, B. Stawińska-Witoszyńska, M. Krzywińska-Wiewiorowska, J.

Skommer, (2009). Ocena lęku szkolnego u dzieci i młodzieży miasta Poznania. *Problemy Higieny i Epidemiologii, Nr 90(1), s. 83.*

¹⁵ B. Karolczak-Biernacka, (1992). *Lęk szkolny. Nowa Szkoła, Nr 9, s. 528-535*; za: Ibidem, s. 83.

independent activities, but in many of the categories it is necessary to support and consolidate the habits developed in order to manage school anxiety consistently.

However, if the child is not supported in crisis situations, school phobia will develop, leading to a loss of security and increased anxiety, including separation anxiety from parents. Elliot makes no secret of the fact that school phobia is also a source of stress for parents, teachers and school management. He also stresses that it has a negative impact on the child's psychosocial development and can even limit the child's education, despite the child's intellectual capacity¹⁶. This results in many unfavourable situations for the child and often for the family. Therefore, these most important environments for the pupil, which include the family and the school, should create the conditions for optimal development and safe functioning. From a research point of view, however, a rather important issue is clearly highlighted, namely the first and most important signal, which is the refusal to go to school. According to the author, it is these students who perform worse academically and who may have long-term consequences such as school failure or dropping out of school¹⁷.

School phobia and teachers' activities

Supporting the pupil as one of the teacher's tasks requires the application of expertise, empathy, a therapeutic approach and a constructive assurance of willingness to provide such help. The situation of the pupil with school phobia therefore seems to be under control, but it is a growing concern

among teachers. Indeed, Salemi and Brown believe that the public health implications of school phobia are significant. In addition, they recognise that different school staff can play a key role in identifying school phobia. The pathology of school phobia can be serious. School health educators and teachers need to be aware of its symptoms and the profile of those at risk in order to provide early intervention. The prevalence of school phobia varies according to its source. Therefore, early educational intervention strategies should be comprehensive and coordinated, but also integrated with existing school health programmes¹⁸. The mentioned activities are mainly the result of the specific tasks of the school, specialists, the teacher, but also the parents, who should be involved in the support of the child/student. We are talking about the teacher's diagnosis, observation of the student's behaviour and, as Mądry-Kupiec and co-authors point out, searching for answers to a number of questions about the causes of the phobia, but also trying to understand the sense or meaning of the message conveyed by the symptom¹⁹. However, Ekman and Davidson point out another important condition, which is to pay attention to the nature of the emotions the child is experiencing, as these become the compass that determines the direction of the child's aspirations, values and behaviour. Emotions can be directed:

- towards people (anger, aggression)
- towards people (love, friendship);
- Away from people (fear, anxiety);
- Against oneself (depression, despondency)²⁰.

¹⁶ J. G. Elliott, (1999). Practitioner Review: School Refusal: Issues of conceptualization, assessment, and treatment. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 40, pp. 1001-1012.

¹⁷ M. Dąbkowska, (2007), Identyfikacja podłoża odmowy uczęszczania do szkoły.. op. cit.

¹⁸ A. Salemi, K. Brown, (2003). School Phobia: Implications for School Health Educators. *American Journal of Health Education*, Vol. 34 (4), p. 199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2003.10761864> [dostęp: 02.03.2024r.].

¹⁹ M. Mądry-Kupiec, E. Zawisza, E. Śliwa, (2018). Objaw, znak, kod. Rozważania w kontekście prawidłowe go i zaburzonego rozwoju dziecka. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Kraków.

²⁰ Ekman, P., Davidson, R.J. (2012). *Natura emocji. Podstawowe założenia*. Sopot, GWP; za: M. Mądry-Kupiec, (2020). *Wieloaspektowość fobii szkolnej na przykładzie studium przypadku Mateusza*. *Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze*, Nr 9, s. 32.

Thus, the teacher's actions, as can be seen, must not be random, but coordinated and clear to both the student and his family, school and often peers. Therefore, an important role, as Ziolkowski points out, is attributed to the perception of the educational situation as stressful, because the main role in it is played by the teacher and the characteristic climate of the classroom built by him or her, which consists of the conviction about the role of the school and the attitude towards students and their parents²¹. Renata Winkel, who presented the role of the teacher in creating a non-constructive influence on the classroom atmosphere, singled out the teacher:

- aggressive, anxious makes unreasonable demands of pupils;
- internally tense constantly checking themselves and the students to ensure that tasks are being done correctly;
- anxious and insecure projecting their fears, insecurities and frustrations onto the pupils;
- inattentive unaware of children's problems and insensitive to what is going on in the classroom²².

Therefore, it seems that a child's/student's school phobia may have its source in the teacher himself, his approach to the student and the demands he makes on him. This fact is confirmed by Martyniuk, who points out that the causes of school phobia can be many, and among them the most troublesome is the fear of the teacher²³. From this point of view, we note the

question of the necessary pedagogical balance, the organization of teaching and learning activities. However, it cannot be overlooked that school phobia "is a neurotic disorder related to the school environment and its demands. Anxiety is often associated with vegetative symptoms and can affect both the cognitive and emotional domains. Family factors, the psycho-physical characteristics of the child and school-related factors all have an impact on the development of this disorder"²⁴. In this context, the teacher is responsible in two ways. With regard to the first assumption, we are talking about the teacher's personality, his approach to the pupil and his understanding of the pupil's difficulties. With regard to the second, we see here the role of the observer and diagnostician who, by looking at the student's problems, sees possible ways of solving them.

At this point, it is worth asking the question about the nature of the teacher's tasks in relation to pupils with school phobia: what measures can be taken to reduce the phenomenon of aversion to school, anxiety or, consequently, school phobia? Bednarkowa and Milo believe that it is important for teachers to cross boundaries, to move away from the known and the familiar, to look for new (creative) solutions, to experiment, to try innovations and to explore the tension between giver and receiver (also traditionally understood as teacher and student), which should become the basis for supporting the dynamically developing human being²⁵. Apart from this, one of the

²¹ P. Ziolkowski, (2020). Fobia u dzieci w wieku szkolnym. Nauka I Społeczeństwo. Przegląd nauk społecznych, technicznych, medycznych i pedagogicznych, Nr 1, Tom 1, s. 74, DOI 10.24426/nis.v1i1.203 [dostęp:02.03.2024r.].

²² E. Petlak, (2007). Klimat szkoły, klimat klasy. Wydawnictwo Żak, Warszawa, za: P. Ziolkowski, (2020). Fobia u dzieci w wieku szkolnym ... op. cit., s. 74.

²³ B. Karolczak-Biernacka, (1991) Stres szkolny ucznia, [w:] B. Hołyst (red.), Człowiek w sytuacji trudnej, Polskie Towarzystwo Higieny Psychiczej,

Warszawa, s. 132; I. Obuchowska, (1993). Lęk, lęk szkolny, hasło [w:] W. Pomykało (red.), Encyklopedia pedagogiczna, Fundacja „Innowacja”, Warszawa, s. 345; za: W. Martyniuk, (2010). Uczniowskie metafory szkoły. Teraźniejszość-Człowiek-Edukacja, Nr 2(50), s. 73.

²⁴ P. Ziolkowski, (2020). Fobia u dzieci w wieku szkolnym... op. cit., s. 79.

²⁵ W. Bednarkowa, M. Miłoś, (2017). Nauczycielskie transgresje w edukacji elementarnej. Lubelski Rocznik Pedagogiczny. T. XXXVI, z. 1, s. 54

main tasks of the teacher should be to actively support the pupil and gradually solve his problems. These postulates are also shared by Kocór, who argues that effective support for the pupil is about the appropriateness of the type of difficult situation to the type of support received, according to the principle: "I help you so that you can help yourself in the future"²⁶. It is therefore important to support the pupil within reasonable limits, with the aim of developing his independence and his ability to cope with difficult situations in the future, and even to come to the aid of others²⁷.

In this context, the work of the "average" teacher should not be limited to the organization and implementation of the didactic and educational process. He cannot, therefore, be content with simply dealing with the pupil's problems; he is obliged, at the very least, to be aware of the difficulties the pupil is experiencing and to enable him to seek specialist help.

Instead of a summary

This brief picture of school phobia in its perspective is not an exhaustive study, but a signal that this phenomenon is still a significant problem for the child, but also often for his family and teachers. For this reason, the emotional aberration in which the pupil finds himself must first of all be supported, and the two most important environments for the child - the family and the school - must be directed towards comprehensive psychological and educational support. There is no doubt that in the context of this reflection, and in accordance with Martyniuk's assumptions, the school is perceived as a

non-negotiating institution that depersonalises the student, and, as it turns out, this is not an isolated opinion, as this is the tone in which the opinions of students resound²⁸. In addition, a pupil who experiences constant failure may also suffer from other emotional disorders. An extreme form of these disorders is the school phobia, i.e. the situational phobia of children and adolescents, whose object of fear is school, its related subjects and its characteristics²⁹. However, the search for a balance between the above-mentioned conditions leads to the assumption that the high quality of the teacher's work depends on his or her effectiveness in recognising students' disorders, including anxiety or school phobia, and in effectively seeking therapeutic solutions. However, the search for a balance between these conditions leads to the assumption that the high quality of a teacher's work depends on his or her effectiveness in recognising pupils' disorders, including anxiety or school phobia, and in effectively seeking therapeutic solutions. Therefore, it can be said that due to students' anxiety problems, these are desirable teacher competencies that should be improved in both pre-service and in-service teachers. In addition, self-improvement of pupils in the process of solving school problems - fears and anxieties - can be considered important. Here again, a special role can be attributed to teachers, as they can give talks and training on how to recognise and protect against school anxiety and phobia as part of parenting hours, workshops or webinars for students and parents. After all, it must not be forgotten that the role of the teacher

²⁶ Por. S. Kawula, (1996). Spirala życzliwości: od wsparcia do samodzielności. Wychowanie na co Dzień, Nr 10-11, s. 14-17.

²⁷ M. Kocór, (2018). O potrzebie badań nad wsparciem uczniów w trudnych sytuacjach w rodzinie i szkole. *Prima Educatione*, Vol. 2, s. 101. DOI: 10.17951/pe/2018.2.99-112 [dostęp: 02.03.2024r.].

²⁸ W. Martyniuk, (2010). Uczniowskie metafory szkoły. ... op. cit., s. 70.

²⁹ D. Heyne, N. J. King, B. J. Tonge, H. Cooper, (2001). School refusal: epidemiology and management, *„Paediatric Drugs”* 10 (3), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11706923?dopt=Abstract>; za: A. Czekał, J. M. Łukasik, (2012). Konsekwencje niepowodzeń edukacyjnych [Consequences of failure at school]. *Debata Edukacyjna* nr 5, s. 47-54.

is not only to educate and nurture, but also to support the student and his or her family. Unfortunately, school phobia, as Elliott writes, is a source of great stress for parents and school management, has an adverse effect on the child's psychosocial development and, despite the intellectual capacity, limits the education of the³⁰.

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³⁰ J. G. Elliott, (1999). Practitioner Review: School ... op. cit.

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Contact

dr. Barbara Grzyb

Institute of Education and Communication Research
Silesian University of Technology
Hutnicza 9-9A,
44-100 Gliwice
E-mail: Barbara.Grzyb@polsl.pl

Dr hab. Beata Pitula, prof. SUT, PhD.

Silesian University of Technology
Hutnicza 9-9A,
44-100 Gliwice
E-mail: bpitula@o2.pl

Agata Kałat

Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu i Nauk o Zdrowiu w Łodzi
E-mail: kalat@poczta.fm