CURRENT PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Part 2

PROBLEMS OF APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY: PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION, AND PSYCHOLOGY OF HEALTH

Część 2

Problemy psychologii stosowanej:
psychologii edukacyjnej oraz psychologii zdrowia i choroby

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VIII
SOCIAL SUPPORT AS A FORM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AID IN THE ARTISTIC EDUCATION
Wsparcie społeczne jako forma pomocy psychologicznej w szkolnictwie artystycznym

ABSTRACT
The article discusses the problems of music education from the perspective of psychological difficulties experienced by students of music schools. The authors have presented the possibilities of using the phenomenon of social support as an element which supplements psychological influences among members of the school community. They also identified opportunities for using various forms of psychological assistance for music school students, their parents and teachers and presented the general patterns characterizing the work of a psychologist in the music school.
Keywords: social support, music education, school community,

STRESZCZENIE
Artykuł porusza problematykę muzycznej edukacji z perspektywy psychologicznych trudności doświadczanych przez uczniów szkół muzycznych. Autorzy zaprezentowali możliwości wykorzystania zjawiska wsparcia społecznego jako elementu uzupełniającego oddziaływania psychologiczne wśród członków społeczności szkolnej. Wskazali także możliwości

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zastosowania różnorodnych form pomocy psychologicznej dla uczniów szkół muzycznych, ich rodziców i nauczycieli oraz przedstawili ogólne prawidłowości charakteryzujące pracę psychologa w szkole muzycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: wsparcie społeczne, edukacja muzyczna, społeczności szkolna

INTRODUCTION

Modern times often put people in situations of instability and insecurity in life. We observe the disappearance of interpersonal relationships, disregard for values, pathologic rivalry and competition. These phenomena affect children, adolescents and adults. They are noticeable in both the spheres of family and professional life, which are definitely not conducive to proper mental development. In such circumstances, people go through a number of difficulties associated with finding themselves in interpersonal relationships, which may have a significant impact on the quality of their everyday functioning.

These conditions have a substantial impact on the psychological development of gifted and sensitive people, who have an internal motivation to express their own creative activity. To a large degree, their artistic development can be inhibited by negative environmental impacts. Musically talented people experience specific overloads, and the largest include:

- Fatigue resulting from daily arduous exercise on the instrument,
- Anxiety related to public performance, and the fear of evaluation by listeners and music experts, have a significant impact on self-assessment and self-esteem,
- Lack of support and understanding from people closest to them – especially parents and teachers – as well as overt or covert rivalry and competition with their colleagues and other musicians.

The above-mentioned situations, combined with the adverse effects of the modern world, can cause suppression or omission of music education and even career in the musically gifted. The young novices of the art of music have their life requirements doubled. On the one hand, they try to meet all their daily duties, functioning in a variety of social roles. On the other hand, they try to meet the demands of professional music education and pursue educational challenges based on solid, conscientious and systematic work based on their own talents and music competencies.

The psychological and social situation of musically talented people causes the growing need to propagate specialist psychological help in the musical environment. This assistance is often needed from the beginnings of music

education, and its recipients are not only students but also their parents and teachers. However, one should note that it is the members of the school community who can assist and support each other, because they belong to the same social group, and understand the problems associated with the music education.

THE THEORETICAL STATUS OF AID AND SUPPORT

The concepts of psychological and social support are characterized by distinct definitions, but one can see a strong interrelation of the thematic areas of both issues. Among the many definitions of support and assistance it is worth noting the view that social support is a kind of helpful behaviour (Wojciszke, 2002), which manifests in existing and available social networks, thanks to interpersonal ties and contacts and a sense of belonging (Sęk, 2006). Mutual demonstration of this sense of belonging has been observed in clinical settings within the activities of assistance and self-help groups (Caplan, 1974). Social support can play a particularly important role in situation where a person is experiencing difficulty or crisis (Sarason, Sarason, Pierce, 1990). Thus, social support is a form of assistance, obtained through group membership (Pommersbach, 1988).

Helena Sęk and Anna Brzezińska (2008) showed specific relationships between the concepts of professional help and social support, stressing that professional psychological help:

- Uses networks of support and knowledge about its types and mechanisms of interaction in a natural way,
- Uses naturally the networks of support,
- Is one-sided support interaction,
- May be treated as a formal source of social support,
- Activates the natural networks of mutual support, e.g. in cooperation with self-help groups.

One can notice in the literature that social support in the context of education is called pedagogical support (Mietzel, 2003). In a natural way, the school environment and school community members can be a source of support for each other. Formally, the process of education in the school aims at promoting the personality, while the psychological forms of assistance in education, among other things, aim at assisting the comprehensive development of children and adolescents (Sęk, Brzezińska, 2008).

A particular kind of psychological overload is experienced by students of artistic schools (music, art and ballet). In addition to their basic school duties of

general education and in addition to the daily difficulties of family and social life, they face specific challenges arising from their artistic abilities. For that reason, they experience continual pressure from the environment and from peer rivalry, as well as the regular forms of checking the level of their talent during exams, concerts, festivals, competitions and other artistic ventures.

This study attempts to identify the invaluable role of psychological assistance and support in the development of musically talented people, against the background of the comprehensive application and importance of support and assistance in human life.

LIFE SITUATIONS
OF TALENTED MUSIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

Every day, the students of music schools are subjected to many artistic challenges. This raises a number of difficult psychological situations. The most difficult psychological overloads connected with education at a music school and performing the profession of a musician include:

- Anxieties related to public performance and fear of evaluation by listeners and music experts, which have a significant impact on their self-assessment and self-esteem;
- Emotional disorders resulting from an inability to cope with stage fright and resulting from adaptation problems and conflicts with the environment;
- Difficulties resulting from an adverse system of personality features, inharmonious development of general abilities, specifically the musical ones, or development defects and disproportions;
- Experience of failure at school resulting from educational errors made by parents or teachers;
- Fatigue resulting from daily arduous exercise on the instrument;
- Lack of support and understanding from people closest to them as well as overt or covert rivalry and competition with their colleagues, other musicians. (See Statkiewicz, 1977, Kępińska-Welbel, 1991, Rosemann, 1991, Steptoe, 2001.)

Nowadays, one can notice that the number of reported problems is increasing and, based on it, one can distinguish three fundamental categories of difficulties. Bellow, a typology of music school students is presented, based on an analysis of the subject matter literature (Steptoe, 2001, Parncutt, McPherson, 2002) and based on our own experiences from psychological practice in a musical environment.

The first category is **special difficulties connected with learning music**. These result from different levels of special musical and general abilities and manifest themselves, for instance, in:

- Manual difficulties or technical imperfections while performing a piece of music;
- Troubles connected with memorizing a piece of music and performing it from memory in front of the public;
- Inability to maintain full concentration on practicing;
- Inability to master the knowledge of theoretical music subjects;
- Fatigue and overload resulting from everyday laborious practicing and preparations for stressful and emotionally exhausting public performances.

The second category consists of **problems of a personal nature, most connected with the functioning of family**. Among them, the most frequent difficult situations are:

- Increasing number of divorces,
- Frequent migrations of one or two parents,
- Single-parental families,
- Parents' insufficient knowledge of the specificity of learning music leading to the inability to provide optimal conditions for successful musical education,
- Parents' shortage of time to show interest in their child's progress in music education, manifested by their absence during their child's examinations or concerts,
- Peer or family conflicts.

The above-mentioned situations do not facilitate the sense of safety required for musically gifted students to flourish and, in such circumstances, young, sensitive and talented students of music school cannot allow themselves to develop their artistic talent. They are forced to build their identity based on disparate styles of social functioning and to cope with their duties resulting not only from their studies at music school and also due to their family situation. The above-mentioned problems manifest themselves very often by a decrease in motivation towards everyday practicing, unpreparedness for classes and reluctance towards acquiring musical and theoretical knowledge.

The third category is constituted by problems **connected with developmental abnormalities**. More and more often such developmental troubles as dyslexia, dyscalculia, motor hyperactivity, aggressive behaviours and even disorders symptomatic to autism occur among students of music schools where such

students successfully go through enrolment to this kind of schools. They often show above-average musical abilities and their developmental difficulties often not to display themselves until later years of their education.

The variety of difficulties experienced by music school students requires widespread professional psychological aid and support in the school community. The support showed by parents and teachers may increase the sense of safety while professional psychological aid may contribute significantly to a decrease in specific difficulties.

TYPES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AID AND THEIR APPLICATION IN MUSIC EDUCATION

Aid is a phenomenon occurring both in professional and unprofessional forms (Sęk, Brzezińska, 2008). Unprofessional aid or assistance can be endorsed by anyone present in given circumstances; for example, by witnesses of an accident, by those who have learnt about a sick family member or a friend's difficult financial situation, or were present during a sudden breakdown at their workplace and are able to react properly. Generally it includes people who can help, encourage, and support a person or group experiencing a specific problem.

Rendering professional psychological aid has the character of socially minded activities and is based on specific rules, which differentiate it from other forms of social support (Toeplitz-Winiewska, 2008). Among the most important rules, one must include activities fully oriented towards the wellbeing of another person or group while passing over one's own benefits. The aim of a psychological intervention is to help solve difficulties, often with the use of the patient/client's own resources.

Rendering psychological help means a wide range of professional services and actions led by psychologists in different spheres of human life. The most important types of psychological assistance include such forms of aid actions as:

- **Psychotherapy** – a specialist form of rendering help to people showing mental and psychosomatic disorders (Sęk, 2003); in present times, psychotherapy does not have a uniform, general theory but it encompasses about ten different orientations, among which the most important are the psychoanalytic, cognitive and behavioural, humanistic and existentialist as well as systemic approaches (Kratochvil, 2003, Drat-Ruszczak, 2005).
    - o **In music education** – students who may be put through psychotherapy include those experiencing strong stage fright connected with public

performance or those experiencing specific problems connected with their inharmonious development or resulting from their inability to mastering specific musical or social competencies.

- **Crisis intervention** – a form of rendering help, aiming at the person afflicted by crisis regaining the ability to solving it unassisted. It can have a character of psychological as well as medical, social, welfare or legal aid, giving emotional support (Leśniak, 1996). The notion of crisis itself means experiencing a situation or feeling a sensation of an unbearable difficulty, exhausting the reserves of resilience and disturbing the mechanisms of managing on someone's own (James, Gilliland, 2008). That is why crisis intervention is an activity aimed at recovering mental equilibrium (Sęk, Brzezińska, 2008).
  - o **In music education** – intervention may be necessary in sudden everyday school/life situations, when a crisis/untypical event occurs or a strong conflict among peers arises, which leads to aggressive behaviour as well as in situations connected with a student's inability to control his or her own emotions, e.g. during an exam/concert or in situations of an unexpected conflict between student and teacher during an individual instrument lesson.
- **Psychological prevention** – a form of preventing and diminishing the probability of pathology and disorders in somatic, mental or social performance (Sęk, 2003); the variety of prevention influences is connected with the specificity of a person or group who may be exposed to the occurrence of undesirable properties (Toeplitz-Winiewska, 2008).
  - o **In music education** – psychological prevention is widely used for the dissemination of psychological knowledge among students, their parents and teachers; it aims to prevent difficulties connected with insecurity and the inability to control emotions in public as well as difficulties with the development of optimal conditions and principles of education among adults around the musically inclined child.
- **Health promotion** – a kind of social movement in which psychologists raise awareness on health, reinforcing a trend to maintain healthy behaviours and support the development of the health resources of the individual and the environment (Sęk, Brzezińska, 2008).
  - o **In music education** – health promotion consists of raising the awareness in students and their parents about specific health problems associated with learning on the chosen instrument and the dissemination of a variety of ways to care for a healthy, psychophysical development, fitness and the ability to unwind/relax, which is recommended after a several-hour practice session on the instrument.

- **Counselling** – a form of assistance offered to healthy individuals experiencing developmental crises or adaptation difficulties (Czabała, Sęk, 2000); this kind of difficulty or crisis situations occurs most often when people experience a sudden change or a change in social role, such as family, professional environment, residence, etc.
  - ○ **In music education** – counselling is becoming more widespread, in the form of single or multiple consultations to resolve a specific problem, related for example to the choice of further education, ascertaining the correctness of their own practice and memorizing strategies, or for support for a personal problem or dilemma.
- **Psychological rehabilitation** – assistance rendered to people with mental or physical disabilities to adapt to their social environment and accept the limitations of life resulting from their disability; it also provides an education in solving difficult situations and building resistance to stressors (Ossowski, 1999).
  - ○ **In music education** – psychological rehabilitation, widely recognized as a form of assistance to persons with disabilities, also has its uses in music education for musically gifted people who experience illness or disability, such as visual impairment, short stature, inborn bone brittleness, slight mental retardation, etc. Attention to the development of music skills in the form of professional education for such people has an additional therapeutic dimension, reinforcing the process of treatment, and increasing the level of personal competence and self-esteem.
- **Supporting self-fulfilment oriented towards the development of an individual** – this form of assistance also applies to healthy people, who generally function well, but want to further improve their way of action or increase their competence. Various types of thematic training can serve such goals, e.g. assertiveness, interpersonal, educational competence, body language, etc. (Toeplitz-Winiewska, 2008).
  - ○ **In music education** – training aims at preparing students for public performance, increasing their ability to cope with their own emotions in a situation of social exposure and their ability to focus during daily practice.

The above overview of the directions of psychological help only shows the outline of the various forms of aid impacts, which are being disseminated by specialists in different walks of life. The use of these forms of assistance in the school environment is equally valuable for improving the psychosocial functioning of children and adolescents. An adaptation of the aid actions to the school environment specificity has a substantial impact on the healthy

development of students, both those manifesting outstanding abilities, as well as those who are experiencing a variety of educational difficulties.

The contemporarily distinguished forms of psychological support are consistent with the working model of the first psychological counselling centres whose activities were directed to music schools. The founder (Manturzewska, 1999) of the first Interschool Psychological Cabinet of Artistic Education (in 1957) emphasizes that psychological help is needed by students of artistic schools, their parents and teachers, both in the case of those experiencing difficulties arising from the specifics of education and in shaping optimal conditions for proper music and artistic development.

The first models of psychological aid, carried out within psychological counselling for music schools, took into consideration the need for multifaceted action. Based on an analysis of reports on the functioning of psychological counselling services in the music community (Lachowicz, 1975, Statkevich, 1977, Rosemann, 1991), it can be noted that the most necessary and popular forms of psychological operations were **diagnosis** (mainly of musical skills and competencies), **prevention, counselling and therapy**, whose scope of activities is similar to the characteristics of the forms of assistance described above.

SITUATIONS REQUIRING SUPPORT IN MUSIC TRAINING

Social support is characterized by the provision of assistance to the person in a difficult situation and is a consequence of human belonging to social networks (Sęk, 2006). It can be seen that education, especially music education, is an example of many difficult situations in which social support is used in a natural way. Learning in the music school is characterized by a number of difficult events and exciting challenges, which children are subjected to from their early age, and at every subsequent stage of education.

Stage fright, which is a phenomenon characteristic for a public performance, often turns into permanent stress associated with unremitting fear to meet the requirements posed by the environment, as well as the requirements of the musician on themselves. The most common thoughts that cause persistent irritability are:

- Fear of comparison with peers,
- Fear of their own performance at the expected, best possible level,
- Fear of acquiring a weaker school mark,
- Fear of making a mistake or a memory gap during the performance,

- Fear of evaluation of listeners, the opinion of the teacher and other important people.

One can enumerate endless difficult situations, sometimes critical ones, in the reality of artistic schools. The individual character of lessons (one-to-one), music lessons in particular, produces various types of interactions between the student and a teacher. Sometimes, the teacher's remarks can hurt the student unintentionally, reducing their self-esteem and motivation to practice as well as their belief in their own abilities.

A crisis situation may also be a failure during a public performance. But the feeling of failure itself is very subjective. For one student failure is to obtain a lower mark during an exam, while for another one failure can be making a petty, completely unexpected mistake.

An additional burden experienced by musically gifted students is their participation in music competitions, which are primarily aimed at the verification of each performer's level of ability, which often involves comparing the performers.

The great variety and frequency of difficult situations among music school students means that the most common support group for them are other students, family or teachers. People genuinely associated with music education can provide real support, thanks to a full understanding of the nature of learning music and a sincere commitment to the school.

A common situation for mutual assistance by the students is belonging to an ensemble (a duo, trio, quartet, or orchestra). The members of one ensemble, through spending extra time on rehearsals and the common experience of concerts, have a greater sense of fusion, not only within the performed music, but also in their interpersonal relationships. The sense of joint responsibility, understanding and showing support also permeates their private lives.

Mutual support from all members of the school community should be common and natural. Most of the difficulties are in fact possible to control, understand and explain, just in a small group by the students themselves, with the help of their teacher or another important and close person.

However, special assistance can be provided by a psychologist working at school, because in addition to having professional competence in providing support and assistance, they know the specificity of the school in which they work. Admittedly, the employment of psychologists in Polish schools, for economic reasons, is not yet very common, but more and more schools, apart from the position of a school Special Educational Needs Counsellor (SENCO), establish the position of a psychologist, clearly distinguishing between the competences of those two specialists.

THE PLACE OF A PSYCHOLOGIST
IN AN ARTISTIC SCHOOL

A psychologist providing specialist support to students has particularly advantageous conditions to identify a problem's specificity reliably. The major advantages of the work of a psychologist in the school environment include:

- Opportunity to observe the child's behaviour in a variety of more or less formal natural situations at school;
- Access to diverse sources of information about the child, with the possibility of performing a psychological interview not only with the child, but also with selected teachers and parents;
- Possibility of early diagnosis and timely intervention as a means of preventing the escalation of the problem;
- Opportunity to conduct regular preventive actions tailored to the needs of a student, class or whole school community (Wilkin-Day, 2005).

The provision of psychological support within the school may have a positive impact on a student experiencing particular difficulties; however, contact with the psychologist is not mandatory. Therefore, it is extremely important for the psychologist working in the school to be a competent person, friendly towards young people and worthy of their trust. This will increase the chance that those in need of professional help are more likely to benefit from it.

C. Swift (after Słapińska, 2007) has made an interesting list of principles concerning a psychologist's performance in the social environment, which are also relevant for shaping the ideal attitudes of the school psychologist. Among the most important principles, she includes: visibility, availability, accessibility, immediacy, flexibility, convergence with values and norms, credibility, legitimacy, authority and training utility.

Following these rules can help the psychologist develop a particular style of work in the school environment, providing security and predictability for his or her own actions in the perception of students, parents and teachers. However, for a psychologist the school is primarily a place of work, and helping students is primarily an obligation. Therefore, in addition to forming a positive attitude and friendly image, the psychologist should thoroughly carry out tasks in accordance with the law providing for the duties of a psychologist, a code of ethics of psychologists, the regulation of the Ministry of National Education on the principles of psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and other institutions, as well as the internal statute of the school.

A psychologist working in a music school is obliged to comply with the regulations of the Minister of National Education and Sport (Journal of Laws of 2003 No. 11 pos. 114), which specify in detail the responsibilities of those involved in psychological and pedagogical care. The most important duties of a psychologist are:

- Diagnosing the student's environment,
- Identifying the student's potential, individual abilities,
- Identifying the causes of difficulties,
- Supporting the student with outstanding abilities,
- Undertaking educational and preventive actions,
- Conducting health education for students, parents and teachers,
- Supporting parents and teachers to solve educational problems.

An invaluable asset of a psychologist, however, is their ability to perform professional obligations conscientiously, while maintaining a full understanding of the difficulties of others, expressing sincere empathy and genuine desire to help in problem solving as well as expressing human kindness. Even the smallest action of the psychologist may be an important experience of support for a person in need.

A key task of a psychologist working at an artistic school is the knowledge of the specificity of learning at that type of school. The psychologist's knowledge of psychological overloads affecting students, and the difficulties faced by them at various stages of education, is an invaluable source of expert assistance and professional support.

In the literature one can also find practical advice for psychologists working in music schools, as proposed by B. Rosemann (1991). She presents a list of the key tasks of a psychologist, which include:

- Assisting in the optimal education of future professional musicians,
- Caring for the mental health of students of artistic schools,
- Combining psychological theory with practice,
- Appropriate use of diagnostic methods to identify the specific needs of the musical environment and the individual student's psychological problems,
- Promoting the principles of mental hygiene in joint workshops and training,
- Inculcating resistance to stress among the students by promoting effective techniques for dealing with psychological burdens,
- Facilitating positive cooperation between the educational staff, parents and tutors.

SUMMARY

In light of the many difficulties faced by music students, psychological support and expert assistance in this area require above all a complete understanding of the specificity of functioning of the person who manifests increased musical abilities and focuses on their development in a professional manner. A supporting person can be any member of the school community, who at a specific moment will listen to the distressed student or colleague, will comfort them, tell them about a similar experience or uplift them by strengthening their self-esteem.

All activities of the psychologist in the artistic school should develop sensitivity, understanding and the ability to show support among the school community in everyday functioning. Indeed, the experience of negative events in human life is inevitable, just as it is inevitable to feel strong emotions during public appearances.

Quoting a statement by the eminent pianist Artur Rubinstein, one can say that *Stage fright is the price we artists pay for miraculous experiences associated with performing music*. Therefore, every artist-musician should be aware of the difficulties that may arise during their music education and career, and also the people closest to them should be aware of the special difficulties facing individuals manifesting outstanding talent in this field. By understanding the environment, the musician will have a sense of security and a natural sense of support, which will undoubtedly facilitate their development and provide greater emotional stability during their entire education and career.

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