

REFLECTIONS ON YOUTH AND UPBRINGING

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Keywords: adolescents, upbringing

Abstract. The study deals with the problems of contemporary youth and the educational dilemmas faced by teachers and parents. The text refers to the efforts to shape a person's identity in the era of popular culture and its effect on upbringing the youth.

ROZWAŻANIA O MŁODZIEŻY I WYCHOWANIU

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, wychowanie

Streszczenie. W opracowaniu poruszone są problemy współczesnej młodzieży i dylematy wychowawcze, stojące przed pedagogami i rodzicami. Tekst odnosi się do trudów kształtowania własnej tożsamości w dobie kultury popularnej i oddziaływania tej kultury na wychowanie młodzieży.

Introduction

The inspiration to write this paper was the reflections on the image of contemporary youth and the educational dilemmas related to this problem. Academic teachers work with young people who enter the path of adulthood. And more and more often the words of people from the previous generation are recalled: „in our times, young people were not like that”. In the subtext, this meant that young people were worse educated and caused more problems. With the dependence on others, little interest in pursuing knowledge, and „cursory” attitudes of young people towards themselves and others, it is more and more often thought that previously these attitudes were different. However, are the differences between the generations actually that significant? Perhaps the youth is just different, which does not mean they are worse. The conditions in which we all live and in which children and young people are raised have changed. Undoubtedly, it must be borne in mind that „all the transformations we are currently experiencing are shaping a new model of human life today, in which every person is treated as individual” (Kukla, 2010, p. 10).

Youth and upbringing: reflections

In recent pedagogical polemics, there has often been a reflection on the formation of the identity of young people or supporting them in their search for that identity. The understanding of identity depends on the accepted concept of man and reality. Identity is defined as self-determination, shaping a person’s image or searching for answers to the questions „Who and what am I?”. This means personal identity. Piotr Sztompka (2002, p. 181) defines identity as „specific qualities of the body and the mind: appearance, beauty, inherited and unique genetic code, personality being a record of unique life experiences, the knowledge we have, our views, beliefs, values, what the person believes in, what the person fears and enjoys, who we love and who we hate, etc.”. The above definition enumerates several elements that make up identity, including views, beliefs, and values relevant to the investigations presented here. Literature also discusses worldview as an important element of identity, which means adopting an ideology that seems attractive to the individual (see Biernat, 2006).

However, it is worth emphasizing, that the common element of the different ways of understanding identity is the criteria that should be met to confirm the existence (sense) of identity. This means a sense of distinctiveness, a sense

of continuity, and internal cohesion (Majczyna, 2000). The sense of distinctiveness concerns experiencing oneself as an individual separated from other people and the environment. In the physical sense, it refers to perceiving the limits of the person's own body, whereas in the mental sense, it is the identification of the individual personality traits, emotions, feelings, attitudes, needs, and aspirations. In developing a sense of distinctiveness, it is important to answer the question of how the person differs from others. The sense of continuity refers to the perception of the person's relative constancy despite the passage of time and the changes taking place in the person. This means that a human changes in the process of development: he or she acquires new experiences, changes their physical appearance, ways of behaving and functioning in society, and yet there are certain characteristics that can be used by a person to confirm that he or she is still the same person despite the passage of time. Furthermore, the sense of internal consistency relates to those internal characteristics that determine the 'individual style of a person's functioning' (Majczyna, 2000, p. 47).

There are discussions among educators about what contemporary youth is like. A lack of role models is increasingly emphasized and universal values cease to constitute the basis for self-determination, while the values promoted by the so-called mass or popular culture are gaining in importance. Furthermore, the lack of attachment to certain values and goals (as some experts say, the lack of a worldview that integrates identity) may lead to an identity deficit (Bernasiewicz, 2009). In addition to the identity deficit, there is also an identity conflict, which means „the coexistence of a multitude of definitions of the self that are internally incoherent or even contradictory” (Wnuk-Lipiński, 2005, pp. 227-228). The emergence of an identity conflict may be caused by the effect of popular culture on teenagers, who are in the process of identity development and have to find patterns and values that are important to them in the multitude of those propagated.

The growing influence of popular culture on the development of young people's identity is evidenced, for example, by Zygmunt Bauman's statement (1993) that „a truly postmodern personality is distinguished by the lack of identity” and by the personal patterns identified by the author, such as a „stroller”, who lives „outside”, a „vagrant”, for whom only changes and living for today are important, a „tourist”, who is an impression-seeker, and a „player” involved in constant battles and games (Bauman, 1993, pp. 18-29). These patterns show the inconsistency and ambiguity of realities, and the multiplicity of choices.

The direct influence of popular culture on people was also indicated by Zbyszko Melosik (2003, pp. 61-71) who enumerated the types of identities: global transparent identity, continuous wanderer identity (global each), apparent identity, and instant identity. The common feature of these personal patterns or types of identity is to show that an individual can be any of them. Furthermore, identity becomes a „gathering of new experiences and contexts of roles” (Witkowski, 1997, p. 176). This understanding of identity makes it necessary to define this process as shaping the identity viewed not as creating but as adorning oneself with external elements of images. Undoubtedly, the choices, views or behaviour of young people are significantly influenced by the media (especially TV and the Internet) promoting popular culture.

The effect of the popular culture on the creation of the person’s own identity can be demonstrated based on physical appearance. Appearance is an important determinant of judging the person, and the omnipresent „cult of youth” causes people to focus on preserving their youth instead of experiencing life in all its aspects. Z. Melosik (1996, p. 72) writes that „in contemporary culture, identity gradually escapes from what was traditionally called the mind or soul and is transferred „to the surface” and begins to be replaced by the body. [...] The identity of the body becomes the body of identity. The identity is then embodied through visual representations”. It is worth recalling some of the threats that seem important for the identity of young people. First of all, it is a way for young men and young women to create or rather choose their own identity. Adolescence is a difficult period of life. What matters to teenagers is their look, attractiveness, success in relations with the opposite sex, and popularity among friends. At the same time, every woman and every man wants to be unique and original and to have a sense of independence of choice. All this is a completely normal stage of an individual’s psychosocial development. However, the sense of independence of choice is at risk in a world ruled by the media, not to say that the choice is limited to propagated patterns.

It is the media that have proposals for every occasion. Magazines and TV commercials show what a woman should look like, how a man should behave, and how to perform social roles to be perceived positively. Therefore, they propose different images, but also indicate how they can be achieved. They represent ready-made ‘matrices’ offered to teenagers in the process of socialization. A person can create his or her image (identity) using diets, cosmetics, clothing, specific behaviours, gestures, words or gadgets. Less importance is attached to what people feel or think, but it becomes important how they present themselves.

As shown by the studies of the adolescent, regardless of gender, the beliefs about the desired appearance are based on pop culture content presented in the mass media (76%), as well as on the opinions of other people (80%), especially peers (68%) (Gajtkowska, 2013). The media show that the body can be modelled and changed in any way the person wants. The women's appearance is unconditionally dominated by a slim figure and an attractive appearance, while the man must be athletic and muscular. Everyone should strive for this because „you are worth it”, as the advertising slogan says, suggesting that such a young person will be perceived as attractive, interesting, more hardworking, wiser or with a stronger will. The trend of excessive slenderness (even anorexic silhouettes) and its harmful effects on teenagers in general has been noticed all over the world. One of the signs of counteracting this trend is the ban on taking part of very skinny models in fashion shows.

The media also offer a „recipe” for beauty, which can be achieved effortlessly with food supplements, anti-obesity medications, and creams for cellulite and wrinkles (used from the age of 25). Furthermore, it is suggested that without these gadgets, a person is less valuable. However, both girls and boys chasing the perfect figure are more and more often suffering from anorexia or bulimia, and boys reach for steroids to carve their figure as soon as possible. Regardless of sex, tanning in a solarium, which is popular among young people, is considered a problem and has become, among others, the subject of the act on health protection against the consequences of solarium use of 15 September 2017, which prohibits the use of a solarium by minors, i.e. under 18 years of age (Journal of Laws 2017, item 2111, Art. 5). Administrative bodies are obliged to disseminate knowledge on the harmfulness of using a solarium, minimising the negative effects of using a solarium, treating persons addicted to using a solarium, and taking preventive measures (Article 3).

On the other hand, the health-oriented trends are becoming increasingly noticeable in Poland, encouraging healthy diets and sports or at least regular physical activity. „Being fit” is very popular. So, one may wonder if this is just a picture used by people to create themselves (because it is not uncommon to see girls in sportswear walking around in fitness clubs but not exercising) or a lifestyle?

Therefore, the complicated world of contemporary youth is becoming increasingly controversial. The pursuit of „being fit” may indicate a turn towards pro-healthy behavioural patterns, but on the other hand, it is in contradiction with the increasing number of different psychoactive substances taken by young people. A noticeable increase in the number of consumed dietary supplements

suggests a desire to achieve the intended goal (in this case, physical fitness or a beautiful figure) by taking a short cut. It is quicker and easier to swallow a pill containing a condensed dose of minerals than to prepare a complete meal. A new lifestyle emerges that could be called „living by taking short cuts”.

With the pursuit of beauty and the healthy lifestyle being promoted by the media, young people are more and more often willing to use various dietary supplements and over-the-counter drugs available on the market. If taken without professional supervision, these substances may disturb the homeostasis of the body. The widespread access to them, often relatively low prices and the wide spectrum of advertising create an illusory sense of safety of their use. A chemical bought without a prescription is still a pharmacological agent that can even lead to addiction. The fact that many supermarkets place them on the shelves next to candy bars and chocolates illusory confirms the impunity of consuming them. Unfortunately, this often results in overdose or physiological disorders (see Szalonka, 2010).

With this approach, young people who expect either a fast and effortless beautiful silhouette or piles of branded goods (clothes or gadgets) look with disappointment at a world in which achieving a goal requires patience, conscientiousness and hard work. The attitude of youth in this aspect demonstrates the „here and now” approach. Unfortunately, the almost immediate meeting the needs is often limited by the financial resources available. The lack of money leads to the phenomenon of “selling the body”. „The possibility of attractive gratification (money, equivalent in the form of purchases, trip financing, tickets, etc.) is mentioned as the first of the external factors favouring teenage prostitution (Kurzępa, 2012, p. 153).

The phenomenon of sex business among young people is very dynamic and changeable, it goes beyond the physical boundaries of buildings of shopping malls and concerns both girls and boys. With regard to the role of the media in the life of young people, which is analysed in this article, it is worth emphasizing the „media” prevalence of this phenomenon, which is conducive to imitation. It is not uncommon for the Internet to accelerate sexual initiation (Kurzępa, 2012).

Who we are in the media is completed by the outfit: depending on what we put on, we can be perceived as romantic, elegant, friendly, sexy or predatory, and yet supposedly unique. The whole created image is complemented by the proposed behavioural patterns, specific vocabulary, and possessed gadgets. The content and meaning is of little importance to the image: what

matters is the right external setting, i.e. the right vocabulary, gestures, and way people speak.

The media also show people how to play different social roles (such suggestions are made to both women and men): how to be a supermum or superdad, a good friend or life partner, how to run a house perfectly (it is necessary to have certain liquids, powders or cloths). In addition, they suggest that everything is temporary and we can change our identity at any time, we can be different, it is enough just to change our appearance and behaviour. As Zbyszko Melosik and Tomasz Szkudlarek (1998, p. 40) pointed out, „popular culture is becoming [...] an extremely effective tool for constructing ways to satisfy the drives, desires, attitudes, and for self-identification”. The above considerations show that the propagated temporality and changeability is a contradiction of what is fundamental for human identity: the permanence and unchangeability of certain elements over time. It can also be assumed that a significant threat is to build only the appearances of identity rather than a true image of what we are.

Discussions with the female university students of pedagogy reveal the strength of the effect of popular culture on women and the low awareness that it is not girls who build their own identity but choose from the proposed patterns. Most of them say that who we are is not determined by appearance, but by recognized values, character traits or behaviour. The students claimed that they have their style of dressing, that they do not follow the fashion. However, more than half of the group comes dressed similarly, with their outfits differing only in colour or fabric. When discussing eating disorders, it turns out that most girls are permanently losing weight, but not following a healthy diet but using food supplements or anti-obesity medications. During breaks, they take out the currently advertised drinks, chips or candy bars. When discussing the issue of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, it turned out that most people see nothing wrong with self-medication, and treat the use of medicines as necessary to function effectively in the current reality. When discussing the problem of behavioural addictions, it turned out that without gadgets such as a mobile phone, laptop or Internet access, the person cannot function socially, because without them and knowledge of the latest Internet or TV trends, they are treated as freaks and are pushed away from the group. Furthermore, the symptoms of addiction to telephones, television, the Internet, or being up to date with the information were underestimated and ignored by the students.

Therefore, it seems that popular culture creates primarily an addictive identity (Szczukiewicz, 2004). Although addictions to media, food, non-eating

or over-the-counter drugs are underestimated, their effects are as dangerous as addiction to psychoactive drugs or gambling. It seems worth thinking whether people with a superficial identity, who are dependent on their image, will be able to adequately perform their roles of bringing up children and instilling socially accepted values to them.

Another aspect of creating the person's self is loyalty, i.e. keeping the word. In our professional and private lives, we often hear many words (promises) suggesting certain actions, such as „I'll call you in a couple of days”, „I'll bring it tomorrow/the day after tomorrow” or „I'll do it in a moment”. It would seem that these are innocent words, but they carry a promise of a concrete action (e.g. for some people, the phrase „I'll get back to you in a couple of days” means the contact in two to three days, whereas „in a moment” means not in the evening or tomorrow but within half an hour, since this is how they were raised in the family and at school). More and more often we come across situations where words mean nothing, are so-called „empty words” and then the people using these words are surprised that there are misunderstandings or that someone is angry or offended.

It is worth stressing here that making empty promises is not just a problem for young people; the problem exists both among young people and adults. Young people are a reflection of what is happening in the adult world. Therefore, if adults do not pay attention to what they say and consequently do not act according to what they say, why should young people act differently? After all, they learn from adults. Another issue is the widespread failure to respond to the fact that adults say something but act completely differently.

One study presented research on the value of words among young people. Unfortunately, the results are worrying. For only 42.6% of the respondents, the words they say have significant meaning. For 52.2% of young people, words have no meaning at all: either they do not attach any importance to them, or they treat them as courtesy phrases because something has to be said (interestingly, this answer was indicated by all the men participating in the research). As shown by the many hours of conversations with young people, such a situation is certainly not due to ignorance but due to a lack of internalization of certain values, identity confusion, and a lack of understanding of the importance of keeping words to shape the person's image (Karpuszenko, 2016, p. 28).

The abovementioned results only confirm the belief that there is a problem with understanding the value of words, with understanding the meaning of words and the value of keeping a word. The so-called post-modernity and

popular culture, where everything is fluid and changeable, where everything can be justified, explained, and changed, undoubtedly contributes to the trivialization of meanings. Relativity is also conducive to the loss of value of words for young people. However, to a large extent, this is simply the result of adults' (parents' and teachers') educational attitudes. Parents, because they apply different rules to their children and different rules to themselves; teachers, because they are focused on teaching, not upbringing. However, studies in the related literature show that young people do not uncritically accept the messages of popular culture and often resist the meanings conveyed by pop culture, such as those concerning family, success or sexuality (Bernasiewicz, 2009).

It seems that the most powerful medium, the Internet, also contributes to such a superficial approach to words and, as a consequence, to specific behaviours. In a virtual world, the perspective or the assessment of an event depends on the website people visit. Many realities seem to coexist on the Internet. In the real world, when dealing with a particular person, the answer has to be given somehow immediately and the person cannot cancel the written text many times as it is the case in the virtual world. Perhaps this is why we tend to make empty promises without thinking about the consequences.

The Internet and social networks are also a rich source of creating the person's image using posts, photos, or videos. It is not about showing what the person is, what he or she likes, what makes them sad. It is about the "likes" and about being popular. Young people, building their self-esteem based on the number of "likes" or page views, have to come up with other ways to attract attention. In the virtual world, the person can present himself or herself as they want but it is not that easy in the real world. It takes much more effort to be authentic and to attract someone's attention and trust. Young people experience problems with communication because in real life people do not communicate using abbreviations and emoticons. It is worth noting that the generation "living by taking short cuts" is quicker and easier to send a particular icon than to make an effort and express in words what they currently feel. Firstly, young people, often busy doing different things, have less time for quality contacts with their environment; secondly, they have less courage to refer to the emotional sphere in face to face contacts. What matters to young people is the number of friends rather than the quality of the friendship. Consequently, with several hundred Facebook friends, there is not even one real friend in the real world. Furthermore, researchers suggest that the multiplicity of Internet contacts, their shallow dimension, and instability may affect the structure of the Self, making it less organized, similarly influencing

the organization of an individual's knowledge about himself or herself (Zajac, Krejtz, 2007).

The generation of Facebook children is a generation of individuals who do not remember the real world and cannot imagine life without the Internet, which has become a companion and educator from an early age. This has a negative effect on the development and functioning of children and young people. Daily (and often taking long hours) contact with the Internet switches the young man's brain bombarded with information into "emergency mode". The functioning of the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which is responsible for higher feelings and empathy, is limited. Young people are compared to people suffering from autism, who have problems with the sphere of social relations maintained in the real world or communicating their feelings. There is also a problem with distinguishing information from creation. Currently, it is the Internet rather than television that influences fashion, shapes culture and educational patterns among young people. Parents are beginning to play an increasingly less important role in the lives of children and young people, whereas the growing fascination with computer games is conducive to the increasingly brutal behaviour in real life (Olczyk, 2012). On the other hand, while recognizing the undoubtedly significant role of the Internet in communication, researchers are increasingly pointing to the development of its personal (sometimes even hyperpersonal) dimension. This proves that text communication does not have to be impersonal. This is because users create a kind of paralanguage, e.g. using the above-mentioned emoticons. The use of the Internet to communicate also favours the disembodiment of identity. In this context, an individual's identity is not limited by age or gender (Zajac, Krejtz, 2007).

Another educational aspect should be noted here. Firstly, our educational system is focused on transferring knowledge, and young people have more and more problems with establishing and maintaining relations, with communication and mutual understanding, with recognizing, expressing, and reacting to emotions. Therefore, there are many pathological ways to relieve stress and tension. In addition to taking commonly known psychoactive substances or aggression, young people are more and more often developing eating disorders, and tendencies for self-mutilation (cutting oneself) used to relieve tension is increasing.

Unfortunately, modern means of communication (phone, computer) are also conducive to ordinary educational problems, such as speaking nicely, speaking in full sentences or even writing correctly. From the teacher's standpoint, significant difficulties are observed in young people in expressing their thoughts and

interpreting the text (they prefer to simply download something from the Internet). Their works are often full of mistakes, not to mention the technical aspects, and they are even visually sloppy. While continuing to discuss the problem from the professional point of view, one can get the impression that the principles of good behaviour are slowly ceasing to apply, not to mention the etiquette. Furthermore, while looking at the clothes which students coming to lectures at universities wear, one can often observe that they have got the wrong place, the students often come to the exam in the clothes suitable only for the beach. The manners should be learned at home and the person who comes to the university should theoretically be already responsible for himself or herself. However, it seems that the university is the last place where the attitudes of young people are shaped and that the failure to react in everyday matters will perpetuate wrong patterns in young people.

Conclusion

There are a lot of problems to look at. These include excessive sexualisation of social life, dangers of the Internet, the feeling of loneliness, indifference and mediocrity that is increasingly common among young people. These problems have been discussed on thousands of pages of publications and during many scientific meetings. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that in their behaviour, the youth is a reflection of the functioning of adults. They learn by imitation and reproduce different models of adult behaviour. If upbringing becomes something sporadic and cursory, young people look for their ways to cope with complex reality, which are often unfavourable from the perspective of upbringing or development of society. In conclusion, we would like to stress that contemporary youth is not bad or worse than previous generations, but it functions in a much more complicated technological and socio-cultural reality and it is uncertain whether previous generations would cope better with contemporary problems.

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