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# Empathic sensitivity toward students with special needs in the era of inclusion, disability studies, and inclusive education

# Wrażliwość empatyczna wobec uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami w czasach inkluzji, *disability studies*, edukacji włączającej

**Abstract**

In inclusive activities, empathic sensitivity is particularly important, as it forms the basis of mutual relationships and inclusion, especially in peer relationships between students without disabilities and those with special educational needs. The aim of this study was to determine whether empathic sensitivity towards students with special educational needs occurs among non-disabled peers in inclusive education. The study included 80 non-disabled students in grades 1–3 of inclusive education. The research hypothesis assumed that one of the effects of inclusive education is a high level of empathic sensitivity among non-disabled students. The leading methods adopted for conducting the research were a survey and a pedagogical test. The research tools used were the Helene Borke Interpersonal Awareness Test, interpreted by Janusz Rembowski, and a questionnaire. The research confirmed a significantly high level of empathic sensitivity among non-disabled students, especially girls, which confirms their satisfaction with mutual peer relationships, understanding the needs of the weaker and sick, and the willingness to help those who require additional support in education and school functioning.

**Keywords:** inclusion, inclusive education, empathic sensitivity

**Streszczenie**

W działaniach inkluzyjnych szczególne znaczenie przypisać należy wrażliwości empatycznej, która stanowi podstawę wzajemnych relacji i włączenia, i to już w relacjach rówieśniczych uczniów pełnosprawnych oraz uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi. Celem prowadzonych badań własnych było poznanie tego, czy w edukacji inkluzyjnej w grupie pełnosprawnych kolegów ma miejsce wrażliwość empatyczna wobec uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi. Badaniami objęto 80 uczniów pełnosprawnych klas 1–3 edukacji włączającej. Przyjęto hipotezę badawczą zakładającą, że jednym z efektów funkcjonowania edukacji włączającej jest wysoki poziom wrażliwości empatycznej uczniów pełnosprawnych. Wiodącą metodą przyjętą do realizacji badań była metoda sondażowa oraz testu pedagogicznego. Jako narzędzie badawcze zastosowano Test Świadomości Interpersonalnej Helene Borke w interpretacji Janusza Rembowskiego oraz ankietę. Badania

potwierdziły zdecydowanie wysoki poziom wrażliwości empatycznej uczniów pełnosprawnych, szczególnie dziewczynek, co potwierdza zadowolenie z wzajemnych relacji rówieśniczych, zrozumienie potrzeb słabszych, chorych oraz chęć pomocy tym, którzy oczekują dodatkowego wsparcia w edukacji i szkolnym funkcjonowaniu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** inkluzja, edukacja inkluzyjna, wrażliwość empatyczna

## Introduction

The dynamic transformations taking place in contemporary special education –particularly regarding its subject, that is the person with a disability, and the social space in which he or she functions – necessitate a closer look at the factors that are particularly vital in terms of mutual relationships, education, and competent assistance. Contemporary shifts have led to the creation of new legal frameworks aimed at meeting individual needs and promoting equality of opportunity for people with disabilities across many areas of life, most notably in education. Inclusion as the opposite of exclusion and the Disability Studies movement, preceded by the determination of people with disabilities themselves toward their autonomy and self-determination within the social model of disability, currently create the conditions for inclusive education and developmental support, while ensuring necessary aid and assistance. In all these endeavours, it is essential to focus on mutual relationships rooted in respect and, at the same time, maintain a particular empathic sensitivity toward the individual needs or difficulties of persons with special needs from the earliest stages of their development.

## Transformations in the situation of people with disabilities driven by processes of inclusion, disability studies, and inclusive education

The Salamanca Statement, followed by subsequent international documents such as the Madrid Declaration, the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, and various UN and European Union documents, became the foundation for identifying the special needs of people with disabilities and creating inclusion policies, particularly within education. The declarations formulated at the Salamanca conference called upon all governments to adopt inclusive policies, specifically emphasizing the right of all children to receive education in mainstream schools as close to their place of residence as possible. In seeking an answer to the question of what inclusion is, Magdalena Tomaszewska acknowledges that numerous definitional approaches to this term can be found in the literature. As she notes, in English-language literature, it signifies: maintenance, inclusion, belonging, and a new perspective not only on education but on the human being

and their place in society. Notably, the term opposite to inclusion is exclusion.[1] The author also posits that "social exclusion is a real threat to the idea of inclusion."[2] Inclusion means incorporating. As David Mitchell writes, the very idea of inclusion and inclusive education encompasses more than just those with disabilities;[3] it refers to the "sources of a person's disadvantaged situation and marginalization."[4] Citing Mel Ainscow and Susie Miles, Grzegorz Szumski argues that this term "goes far beyond the traditional understanding of special education," as it also covers other groups at risk of exclusion.[5]

A significant shift in this regard was introduced by the social model of disability, in which persons with disabilities themselves – driven by determination and an awareness of their rights – identified exclusionary practices within the then-dominant medical model of disability. The social model of disability has brought about numerous beneficial changes in the situation of persons with disabilities, contributing to the elimination of many social barriers and stereotypes, and to the combating of discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies.[6] The foundations of inclusive education are rooted in a philosophy of accepting students' individual capabilities and securing support systems for them, ensuring that everyone has equal chances for education and development. This approach assumes that every student possesses the same inherent value and is entitled to the same rights.[7]

Furthermore, the trends within the contemporary, interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies confirm the socio-economic contexts of disability as a refusal to accept the violation of the rights of certain communities and individuals particularly at risk of discrimination. It addresses the consequences of negative social attitudes and behaviours, defined as "the improper treatment of specific individuals due to their group affiliation."[8] In her article, entitled *Areas of Interest and Research Trends in Contemporary European Disability Studies – Reflections from Academic Discourse Analysis*, Jolanta Rzeźnicka-Krupa acknowledges that research in this field highlights

[1] M. Tomaszewska, *Inkluzja – teoria i praktyka pedagogiczna, Gdzie tkwi jej początek i sukces?* [in:] *Edukacja inkluzyjna i terapia dzieci i młodzieży ze specjalnymi potrzebami*, eds. K. Barłóg, M. Kocór, Jarosław 2017, pp. 11–13.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 15.

[3] D. Mitchell, *Sprawdzone metody w edukacji specjalnej i włączającej. Strategie nauczania poparte badaniami*, Gdańsk 2016, p. 351.

[4] I. Chrzanowska, *Pedagogika specjalna. Od tradycji do współczesności*, Kraków 2015, pp. 554–555.

[5] G. Szumski, *Wokół edukacji włączającej. Efekty kształcenia uczniów z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w stopniu lekkim w klasach specjalnych, integracyjnych i ogólnodostępnych*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 13–14.

[6] A. Twardowski, *Społeczny model niepełnosprawności -analiza krytyczna*, "Studia Edukacyjne" 2018, No. 48, p. 112.

[7] K. Barłóg, *Introduction* [in:] *Edukacja inkluzyjna i terapia dzieci i młodzieży ze specjalnymi potrzebami*, eds. K. Barłog, M. Kocór, Jarosław 2017, p. 7.

[8] M. Wlazło, *Disability Studies wobec natury postaw dyskryminujących*, "Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej" 2017, No. 16, p. 121.

the aspects of exclusion and inclusion of persons with disabilities, alongside legal solutions designed to counteract discrimination.[9] Citing Bill Hughes, she confirms that emotions are a source of judgment and a way of assigning value. In this context, it is crucial to analyse the feelings of non-disabled people toward persons with disabilities and special needs. A significant role is played here by emotions such as pity and fear – or even more extreme reactions like disgust[10] – as well as particularly positive emotions, such as joy or the satisfaction derived from mutual relationships.

## Empathic sensitivity toward persons with disabilities as a foundation for competent assistance and satisfying mutual relationships

Empathy, as *Einfühlung*, is a phenomenon as old as humanity. Even in antiquity, although not yet defined by this specific term, it was presented as a connection with emotional, moral, and social development.[11] Among others, Arthur Schopenhauer referred to this phenomenon as *compassion*.[12] Empathy is a dynamic phenomenon, developing and shifting alongside changes in personality. It is the ability to emotionally identify with someone else; it is a fundamental existential basis for every human being. Empathy is not merely "stepping into" the world of another person, but moving from one's own individuality and perspective toward the recognition of the other person's identical nature.[13] As Edyta Stein writes,"in feeling, I experience not only objects but also myself; I experience feelings originating from the depths of the SELF."[14] Empathy is thus a reaction that arises from understanding someone else's psychological state and is similar to what that person is feeling. It is one of the key elements of socio-emotional development, influencing behaviour toward others – especially those who find themselves in a difficult situation. Children with higher levels of empathic sensitivity exhibit pro-social behaviours; they are open to helping, caring, cooperation, and kindness directed toward another person. They are eager to comfort and sympathize, while simultaneously exhibiting lower levels of aggression.[15] The development of empathic sensitivity in children is a progressive process of learning

[9] J. Rzeżnicka-Krupa, *Obszary zainteresowań i nurty badawcze we współczesnych europejskich studiach nad niepełnosprawnością – refleksje z analizy dyskursu akademickiego*, "Niepełnosprawność" 2011, No. 5, p. 79.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 72.

[11] A. Gasiulowa, *Wrażliwość empatyczna dzieci z dysfunkcją narządu ruchu a ich środowisko rodzinne*, Bydgoszcz 1993.

[12] A. Schopenhauer, *O podstawie moralności*, Kraków 2005.

[13] Z. Uchast, *Empatia jako postawa egzystencjalna*, "Roczniki Filozoficzne" 1996, Vol. 44, No. 4. p. 42.

[14] E. Stein, *O zagadnieniu wczucia*, Kraków 1988, p. 41.

[15] A. Lasota, *Empatia i zachowania prospołeczne małych dzieci w percepcji rodziców*, "Studia z Teorii Wychowania" 2023, Vol. XIV, No. 1(42), p. 247.

emotions through the imitation of adults, discussing feelings, and asking about needs.[16] It can be assumed that empathy is a sensitization to the emotions of others. There is a confirmed strong link between empathic sensitivity and pro-social behaviours, such as helping and comforting, which is of particular value in relationships with children with special needs, such as those with Down syndrome, ASD, ADHD, or others.

## Research methodology

The primary objective of this research was to determine whether empathic sensitivity toward students with special educational needs exists among their non-disabled peers. The specific objectives were divided into two categories: theoretical-cognitive, aimed at providing knowledge and identifying the level of empathic sensitivity among students in inclusive classrooms; and practical-implementational, aimed at developing conclusions for pedagogical practice regarding the potential for fostering empathic sensitivity in students who interact with peers with special educational needs. The main research problem is the question of the level of empathic sensitivity among students in inclusive education. The following specific research problems were also established: What feelings and emotions do the studied children experience? Do they empathize with the emotional states of others? What is their overall level of empathic sensitivity? Are there gender-based differences in empathic sensitivity? Do students effectively differentiate between the emotional states of others? It was hypothesized that the level of empathic sensitivity among the vast majority of students in inclusive education is high. It was further assumed that these students primarily experience positive feelings and emotions, such as joy, happiness, and satisfaction; that they empathize with the emotional states of others; and that their level of empathic sensitivity ranges from medium to high. Additionally, it was hypothesized that girls in these classes exhibit higher levels of empathic sensitivity and that the vast majority of students in inclusive education can distinguish between different emotional states in others. The research utilized the diagnostic survey method and a pedagogical test. The research tool employed was the Helene Borke Interpersonal Awareness Test, as adapted by Janusz Rembowski.[17] The study was conducted at the turn of 2025/2026 in the Podkarpacie region among early childhood education students from rural environments. It was assumed that research in such a setting would be particularly interesting, as it might reveal potential shortcomings in the implementation of inclusive education. The study included 80 early childhood students, consisting of 41 girls (51.3%) and 39 boys (48.7%).

[16] A. Filip, A. Mróz, I. Ocetkiewicz, *Dlaczego warto i jak można rozwijać empatię u dzieci we wczesnym i średnim dzieciństwie*, "Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce" 2024, Vol. 19, No. 2(73), pp. 39–49.

[17] J. Rembowski, *Empatia*, Warszawa 1989.

**Presentation of results**

In analysing the results from the first scenario of Borke's Interpersonal Awareness Test – which reads: "Imagine it is morning, the sun is shining, and you realize you have to go to school; what do you feel then (joy, happiness, satisfaction, sadness, fear, anger)?" – one can observe the presence of positive emotions and feelings among the surveyed students.

**Table 1. Students' feelings and emotions after listening to Scenario No. 1**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | 32 | 40.0 |
| | Happiness | 24 | 30.0 |
| | Satisfaction | 24 | 30.0 |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |
| Negative | Sadness | – | – |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |

Source: present findings.

In the studied group of students, all participants (100.0%) confirm that school is associated with positive feelings and emotions. Specifically, 40.0% of the respondents indicate that school triggers joy, while 30.0% state it is a source of happiness, and the remaining 30.0% report a sense of satisfaction.

Subsequently, the research used the content of Scenario No. 2: "Imagine you are on the school playground; the weather is beautiful, and the teacher has brought out an animation scarf and balls, inviting everyone to play together. What do you feel in this situation?".

**Table 2. Feelings and emotions exhibited by children after listening to Scenario II**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | 38 | 47.5 |
| | Happiness | 12 | 15.0 |
| | Satisfaction | 30 | 37.5 |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |
| Negative | Sadness | – | – |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |

Source: present findings.

Similarly to the findings in Table 1, the research confirms that students in inclusive schools primarily exhibit positive emotions and feelings regarding the

organization of shared activities and play. Joy was the most prevalent emotion, reported by nearly half of the respondents (47.5%), followed by satisfaction (37.5%), and happiness (15.0%). It can therefore be assumed that children do not mind the company of students with special educational needs, as all participants (100.0%) exhibited positive emotions toward the planned activities and play. Furthermore, no students (0.0%) reported negative emotions or feelings for this reason.

The content of the third scenario focused on students' shared presence and their relationships with peers who have special educational needs. Its content was as follows: "Imagine you are sitting on a rug with your friends; you are playing together, it is fun and you are all having a good time together. What do you feel?". The students' responses are presented below in Table 3.

**Table 3. Students' emotions after the presentation of Scenario No. 3**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | 65 | 81.2 |
| | Happiness | 15 | 18.8 |
| | Satisfaction | – | – |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |
| Negative | Sadness | – | – |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |

Source: present findings.

The research confirms that despite the presence of students with special educational needs in the classroom, the students still present very positive feelings and emotions toward the situation of shared presence and various play-based relationships (100.0% of those surveyed). Simultaneously, none of the surveyed students present negative feelings and emotions toward this type of situation (81.2% present joy, and 18.8% happiness from mutual presence and mutual relationships).

Next, the students were presented with a scenario with the following content: "Imagine you are entering the school and you see your teacher. What do you feel?".

The research shows that in a meeting with the teacher, students in inclusive education primarily feel joy (100.0%), which constitutes positive emotions and feelings. This is of particular value, as the teacher is the organizer of the process of both teaching and the shared activities that integrate the group of non-disabled students and those with special educational needs. It should be noted that none of the surveyed students studying in inclusive education indicated negative emotions from this type of relationship, which undoubtedly proves the positive atmosphere in the school classroom and the accompanying positive, mutual relationships.

**Table 4. Emotions experienced by the surveyed students after listening to the content of Scenario No. 4**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | 80 | 100.0 |
| | Happiness | – | – |
| | Satisfaction | – | – |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |
| Negative | Sadness | – | – |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |

Source: present findings.

The content of the next scenario focused on the empathy for emotional states among early childhood education students. Scenario Five by Borke: "Imagine you are playing with your friends on the rug and you see two people suddenly start fighting and pulling each other's hair. What do you feel?".

**Table 5. Emotions accompanying the children after listening to the content of Scenario No. 5**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | – | – |
| | Happiness | – | – |
| | Satisfaction | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |
| Negative | Sadness | 59 | 73.8 |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | 21 | 26.2 |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |

Source: present findings.

The surveyed students confirmed that in a situation where another person, another child, is being harmed, they strongly want to help them, and they are accompanied by such emotions as: sadness (73.8%) and anger (26.2%). The sadness is caused by empathizing with the classmate's difficult situation, while the anger stems from helplessness and the fact that the classmate was harmed.

Subsequently, the students were presented with the content of the next scenario: "Imagine you are playing with blocks with your friends; you are all happy and having a pleasant time, when suddenly you notice that one person is crying. How do you feel in such a situation?". Empathy for these types of emotional state is presented in the next table, Table 6.

**Table 6. Emotions accompanying the children after listening to Scenario No. 6**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | – | – |
| | Happiness | – | – |
| | Satisfaction | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |
| Negative | Sadness | 80 | 100.0 |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | – | – |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |

Source: present findings.

The research unequivocally confirms the empathy of students in a situation where their classmate is crying; they also experience deep sadness (100.0%).

The content of the next scenario was the statement: "Please imagine that you are sitting in a classroom at school and you witness someone borrowing a pen from another person, which they destroy after a moment. What do you feel?". The surveyed students' statements regarding this situation are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7. Emotions and feelings accompanying the children after listening to Scenario No. 7**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | – | – |
| | Happiness | – | – |
| | Satisfaction | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |
| Negative | Sadness | – | – |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | 80 | 100.0 |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |

Source: present findings.

Among the felt emotions, the surveyed students chose negative emotions in the presented situation (100.0%); they indicated anger when someone destroys another person's property, empathizing with their emotional states. In the next scenario, the surveyed students were asked: "How do you feel when you see someone who is sick and complains that something hurts?". Empathy regarding the illness and the poor well-being of a classmate is presented by the data contained in the next table, Table 8.

As the obtained results indicate, all surveyed students, when they notice that someone-their classmate-is sick, present sadness, but also a desire to comfort them and provide them with help and support (100.0%). The surveyed students feel a correct, negative emotion adequate to the situation, i.e., the illness, pain, or disability of a classmate.

**Table 8. Emotions accompanying the children after listening to Scenario No. 8**

| Emotional tone | Manifested emotions | Number (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive | Joy | – | – |
| | Happiness | – | – |
| | Satisfaction | – | – |
| In total | | – | – |
| Negative | Sadness | 80 | 100.0 |
| | Fear | – | – |
| | Anger | – | – |
| In total | | 80 | 100.0 |

Source: present findings.

Subsequently, the empathy levels of the children were identified. Each correctly identified emotional state of the character in the corresponding scenario was assigned one point, while each incorrect answer was assigned zero points. This was done by calculating the threshold values and summing all points in horizontal columns for each surveyed person. To determine the level of empathy, data considering the number of correct answers was used. A three-point scale was adopted, which depended on the number of points obtained in the range from 0 to 8.

The empathy levels were established as follows:

a) high: 8–7 points;
b) medium: 6–5 points;
c) low: 4–0 points.

In the surveyed group of non-disabled children, there is a lack of a low level of empathy, and the surveyed students present medium and high levels of empathic sensitivity (100.0%). It is the girls who primarily present a high level of empathic sensitivity (56.1%), while for boys it is 33.3%. A medium level was presented by 64.1% of boys, while 2.6% showed a low level. The research confirms that girls also present a medium level of sensitivity (43.9%) with a complete absence of a low level of empathic sensitivity. The surveyed non-disabled children from inclusive classrooms also correctly distinguish emotional states in people, including joy (100.0%), sadness (97.6%), fear (97.6%), and anger (92.8%).

## Conclusions

Modern international and interdisciplinary transformations in implemented inclusive actions and within the field of Disability Studies find confirmation in practical applications within inclusive education. The diagnosis of empathic sensitivity among early childhood education students, conducted as a result of research using Borke's technique, fully confirms the students' sensitivity to the special needs of

their classmates. The results confirm manifestations of understanding presented by the students – not only acceptance but also the willingness to provide help in educational situations and in many other difficulties faced by students with special needs.

The aim of the research conducted among non-disabled students studying in inclusive education with students with special educational needs was an attempt to answer the question: what is the empathic sensitivity of these children? In many situations, it is these children who determine the well-being of a student with special needs in the school classroom, as well as their self-esteem, sense of acceptance, and peer support. The research confirms that the level of empathic sensitivity among students who study with peers with special educational needs in inclusive education is, in the vast majority, high. Most of the surveyed children experience positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and satisfaction; they feel positive emotions when going to school, which may indicate that they are also satisfied with their relationships, mutual friendships, shared games and activities, the atmosphere of safety, and the joy derived from contact with their peers and teacher.

At the same time, students experience negative emotions when they participate in their classmates' difficult experiences or events - when a child is harmed by a peer, when he or she cries, or feels lonely or defenceless. Similarly, they feel anger when they notice a classmate being harmed, someone destroying their property, or when a peer is sick, in pain, or suffering. The research also confirmed that girls are more empathic than boys. The vast majority of girls present a high level of empathic sensitivity, while among boys, the level of empathic sensitivity also ranks at a medium level. It can therefore be assumed that the surveyed children positively interpret the emotional states of others, which is of particular importance regarding the special needs of students with disabilities, as well as their peer relationships and acceptance of childhood difference. This constitutes an understanding of their difficulties but also their rights, with respect for their autonomy and the right to integration and inclusion, in accordance with the trends of inclusion and normalization, and against tendencies toward exclusion. It is also a recognition of equal rights to education and development. The fight against discrimination is also one of the goals of the European Union, which calls for equal treatment, sensitisation to the rights and needs of people with special needs, and the prevention of social marginalization and exclusion.[18]

The results of many studies confirm that the emotional sensitivity of girls is associated with empathy directed toward another person, with comfort, anxiety, and compassion – which is not observed in boys.[19] It is precisely the inclusive education environment that can play a unique role here in the "emerging prosociality of the child, moral reasoning, building satisfying In order for a person with a disability

[18] E. Wapiennik, R. Piotrowicz, *Niepełnosprawny – pełnoprawny obywatel Europy*, Warszawa 2022, pp. 43–45.

[19] A. Lasota, *Empatia i zachowanie*…, p. 247.

to function on equal terms with non-disabled peer relationships, and preventing aggressive behaviours."[20]

For a person with a disability to function in the same way as non-disabled people, or to similarly achieve life goals and have the possibility of control over their own life, it is essential to create conditions, a proper climate, and acceptance of diversity, including empathic sensitivity, which foster building faith in one's own abilities, self-esteem, autonomy, or self-determination.[21] As Szumski writes: "inclusive education is a concept so innovative in relation to school practice that changes to the framework conditions of functioning are insufficient for its implementation,[22] it requires a change in the school climate, attitudes, and empathic sensitivity to the special needs of students who, despite their difficulties, expect acceptance, kindness, and empathic support."

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[20] A. Filip, A. Mróz, I. Ocetkiewicz, *Rozwój empatii*…, p. 40.

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