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Relational approaches in special education for students on the autism spectrum

Podejścia relacyjne w pedagogice specjalnej wobec uczniów w spektrum autyzmu

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present a theoretical analysis of the relational approach in contemporary special education in the context of educating students on the autism spectrum. The paper is review-based and draws on an analysis of pedagogical, psychological, and interdisciplinary literature concerning the importance of relationships in the processes of development, learning, and emotional regulation. The article discusses the philosophical and psychological foundations of the relational approach and its significance in the context of changing ways of understanding the autism spectrum – from a deficit-oriented perspective toward a subject-centred approach. Particular attention is devoted to the role of the special education teacher as a co-creator of an educational relationship grounded in empathy, attentiveness, and reciprocity. The article emphasizes the importance of relationships as a foundation for effective and ethical pedagogical practice.

Keywords: special education, autism spectrum, relational approach, teacher–student relationship, inclusive education

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie teoretycznej analizy podejścia relacyjnego we współczesnej pedagogice specjalnej w kontekście edukacji uczniów w spektrum autyzmu. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy i opiera się na analizie literatury pedagogicznej, psychologicznej oraz interdyscyplinarnej dotyczącej znaczenia relacji w procesie rozwoju, uczenia się i regulacji emocjonalnej. Omówiono filozoficzne i psychologiczne podstawy podejścia relacyjnego oraz jego znaczenie w kontekście zmieniających się sposobów rozumienia spektrum autyzmu – od perspektywy deficytowej ku podejściu podmiotowemu. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono roli pedagoga specjalnego jako

współtwórcy relacji edukacyjnej opartej na empatii, uważności i wzajemności. Artykuł podkreśla znaczenie relacji jako fundamentu skutecznej i etycznej praktyki pedagogicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika specjalna, spektrum autyzmu, podejście relacyjne, relacja nauczyciel–uczeń, edukacja włączająca,

Introduction

Special education, as a subdiscipline of educational sciences, develops its theoretical and practical foundations in response to dynamic social, cultural, and scientific transformations.[1] A particularly important place within this field is occupied by issues related to the autism spectrum (Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD), due to the complexity and diversity of functioning among diagnosed individuals.[2] Contemporary approaches to individuals with ASD go beyond the framework of traditional therapy and corrective education, increasingly focusing on relationships, individuality, and the subjectivity of the student.[3] In this context, the relational approach is gaining increasing importance, as it responds to the need for a deeper understanding of the student as a person capable of forming bonds, co-participating, and actively shaping their identity through interaction with Others.[4]

The autism spectrum (ASD), as a diagnostic category, encompasses a wide range of differences in social, communicative, and cognitive functioning. Traditional models of working with individuals with ASD have often focused on reducing deficits and correcting undesirable behaviours. However, the latest research in neuropsychology, developmental psychology, and inclusive pedagogy indicates that a key factor supporting the development of individuals with ASD is the quality of interpersonal relationships, including the teacher–student relationship.[5] The relational approach draws on the assumptions of dialogical philosophy (Martin Buber,[6] Emmanuel Levinas[7]), humanistic psychology (Carl R. Rogers[8]) as well as attachment theory (John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth), as well as contemporary concepts of the social brain and relational neuroscience (Daniel J. Siegel,[9] Colwyn Trevarthen[10]).

[1] J. Jukiewicz, *Wprowadzenie do współczesnej pedagogiki specjalnej* [in:] *Współczesne kierunki w pedagogice specjalnej*, ed. J. Jukiewicz, Warszawa 2021, pp. 10–12.

[2] E. Pisula, *Autyzm i przywiązanie. Perspektywa rozwojowa*, Gdańsk 2016, s. 17–19.

[3] G. Szumski, M. Włoch, *Uczeń z autyzmem w klasie ogólnodostępnej*, Warszawa 2023, pp. 21–24.

[4] H. Olechnowicz, *Dialog, rozwój, wychowanie*, Warszawa 2011, p. 13.

[5] U. Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*, Oxford 2014, p. 90.

[6] M. Buber, *Ja i Ty*, Warszawa 2002, p. 42.

[7] E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, Paris 1998, p. 81.

[8] C.R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn*, Columbus, OH 1969, p. 104.

[9] D.J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, New York 2012, p. 211.

[10] C. Trevarthen, *What young children give to their learning relationships*, "European Early Childhood Education Research Journal" 2011, Vol. 19(2), p. 145.

All of these approaches emphasize that relationships constitute the foundation of learning, self-regulation, and the formation of individual identity.

In the context of educating students on the autism spectrum, particular importance is attached to the ability of the teacher/special educator to initiate and sustain relationships, as they fulfil the role of a guide, mediator, and participant in the developmental process. Building relationships requires from the educator not only substantive knowledge but also high social and emotional competencies, flexibility, and attentiveness to the student's individual way of experiencing the world.[11]

The aim of this article is to present the significance of the relational approach within modern special education in relation to students on the autism spectrum. The paper provides an analysis of the theoretical foundations of the relational approach as well as its practical implications for the everyday work of teachers and special educators. The article constitutes an attempt to justify the need for a paradigm shift toward education based on relationships and reciprocity as a condition for effective support of the development and integration of individuals with ASD.

Theoretical foundations of the relational approach in special education

Contemporary special education increasingly emphasizes a relationship-oriented model of education, which assumes that the processes of teaching and upbringing cannot be carried out effectively without taking into account the emotional and interpersonal context. The teacher is no longer merely an implementer of the core curriculum but a companion in the student's development – especially for those who experience cognitive, emotional, and/or social difficulties.[12]

The pedagogical relationship is gaining importance in the context of neurodiversity and individualized approaches. Students with special educational needs – including individuals on the autism spectrum – require not only appropriately selected teaching methods but, above all, the presence of an adult who is capable of building a relationship based on predictability, empathy, and reciprocity.[13]

In the subject literature, it is noted that the building of an educational bond is based on emotional attunement and the teacher's openness to the student's individual style of functioning. It is precisely within everyday micro-interactions that a space of trust emerges, which becomes the foundation of the student's readiness for cooperation and exploration.[14] The teacher thus fulfils the role of an intermedi-

[11] A.M. Zawadzka, *Relacyjna pedagogika specjalna* [in:] *Współczesne kierunki w pedagogice specjalnej*, ed. J. Jukiewicz, Warszawa 2021, p. 140.

[12] K. Knoppik, *Relacyjność w pracy wychowawczej*, Kraków 2018, pp. 23–25.

[13] P. Petry, *Pedagogika serca – w trosce o relację w edukacji*, Lublin 2017, pp. 65–67.

[14] M. Kostrzyński, *Relacyjność jako podstawa działań edukacyjnych*, "Forum Pedagogiczne" 2020, No. 10(1), pp. 147–149.

ary between the child and the demands of the school environment. Through their presence, the teacher can regulate tension, explain social rules, and create a "bridge" between the student's inner world and educational reality.[15]

This approach gains particular significance with regard to individuals on the autism spectrum. Although children/students with ASD often exhibit difficulties in social communication, this does not imply a lack of need for relationships – on the contrary, many of them demonstrate a need for closeness and attachment, although they are not always able to express it adequately.[16] A teacher who is able to read subtle signals and adapt to the student's style of communication becomes a key mediator in the process of social development.

Research confirms that a high quality of the teacher–student relationship correlates with greater motivation to learn, better emotional self-regulation, and a greater readiness to engage in social interactions.[17] This is particularly true for students with developmental difficulties, who function more effectively in environments characterized by a high level of emotional support and predictability.[18]

In Polish pedagogical thought, a current has developed that emphasizes education through dialogue, attentiveness, and the ethical presence of the teacher. Pedagogical work is understood in this approach as a dynamic process of shared coexistence rather than a one-sided influence.[19] The teacher–student relationship is therefore not a tool for achieving didactic goals, but a value in itself, fostering the student's subjectivity and agency. At the core of this approach lies the assumption that a child – regardless of developmental difficulties – has the potential to co-create the educational space, provided that conditions based on empathy, respect, and emotional stability are ensured.

Contemporary models of inclusive education therefore promote not only the adaptation of physical space, but also a change in the quality of the teacher's contact with the student.[20]

It is worth emphasizing that Polish educational law regulations also indicate the importance of relationships in the processes of education and upbringing. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the principles of providing psychological and pedagogical support highlights the necessity of

[15] A.M. Zawadzka, *Relacyjna pedagogika*…, pp. 144–146.

[16] S. Roffey, *Positive Relationships: Evidence Based Practice across the World*, Dordrecht 2012, pp. 100–101.

[17] D.A. Hughes, *Attachment – Focused Parenting: Effective Strategies to Care for Children*, New York 2009, pp. 51–52.

[18] B. Jankowiak, *Pedagogika dialogu jako fundament relacyjnej edukacji*, "Paedagogia Christiana" 2018, No. 1(41), pp. 48–50.

[19] L. Florian, K. Black-Hawkins, *Exploring inclusive pedagogy*, "Cambridge Journal of Education" 2011, No. 41(4), pp. 415–417.

[20] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, *Empowering Teachers to Promote Inclusive Education*, Odense 2015, pp. 13–14.

adapting methods and forms of work to the individual needs of the student, which in practice means creating space for a relational approach within the school.[21] Thus understood, individualization also encompasses the quality of interpersonal contact – the building of relationships that enable the student to engage in the educational process on their own terms and at their own pace.

Autism spectrum and the need for relationships

The initial descriptions of autism by Leo Kanner[22] and Hans Asperger[23] focused on specific behavioural characteristics and difficulties in social interactions. For many years, a deficit-based approach predominated, which viewed autism as the result of neurological and psychological dysfunctions, concentrating on the elimination of "undesirable" behaviours and the teaching of "missing" skills. With the development of research and a deeper understanding of the complexity of the autism spectrum, a paradigm shift occurred. The concept of the spectrum proposed by Lorna Wing and Judith Gould[24] emphasized the continuum of symptoms and the diversity of functional profiles. Attention began to be paid not only to difficulties but also to the strengths and potential of individuals with ASD, which contributed to the search for more individualized and relational forms of support.

Contemporary diagnostic classifications – such as DSM-5-TR[25] and *ICD-11*[26] – have replaced earlier, separate diagnostic categories (e.g., childhood autism, Asperger syndrome), unifying them within a single category: autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This approach takes into account the variability of symptoms, levels of functioning, and support needs, and promotes a broader, more individualized diagnostic perspective. Such an approach provides a starting point for a deeper understanding of individuals with ASD – not only through the lens of their limitations, but also their developmental and relational needs.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterized by difficulties in social communication and by repetitive patterns of behaviour. However, contrary to

[21] Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie zasad udzielania pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej w publicznych przedszkolach, szkołach i placówkach (Dz.U. 2017, poz. 1591).

[22] L. Kanner, *Autistic disturbances of affective contact*, "Nervous Child" 1943, No. 2, pp. 217–220.

[23] H. Asperger, Die *„Autistischen Psychopathen" im Kindesalter*, "Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten" 1944, No. 117, pp. 76–81.

[24] L. Wing, J. Gould, *Severe impairments of social interaction and associated abnormalities in children*: *Epidemiology and classification*, "Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders" 1979, No. 9(1), pp. 11–15.

[25] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR)*, Washington, D.C. 2022, pp. 56–59.

[26] World Health Organization, *International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11)*, Geneva 2019, cod 6A02.

stereotypical beliefs, individuals with autism are not devoid of the need for contact with Others; on the contrary, they often need it in their own way, yet do not know how to initiate and maintain it.[27]

Many researchers emphasize that children with ASD demonstrate certain forms of attachment from a very early age, particularly toward individuals who show them understanding and predictability. From Simon Baron-Cohen's perspective, the lack of spontaneous social responses in individuals with autism does not necessarily indicate an inability to form bonds, but rather difficulties in communicating and expressing them.[28] Michael Tomasello notes that the abilities for cooperation and for expressing communicative intentions in children on the autism spectrum do not disappear, but rather develop at a slower pace and require purposeful support through appropriately adapted social interactions.[29] At the educational level, the need for relationships is manifested in many aspects of the functioning of a student with ASD: a sense of safety, motivation to learn, and the ability to cooperate – all of these elements depend on the quality of contact with the teacher and peers. A child on the autism spectrum who does not understand social rules needs a teacher as a "translator" of the social world – someone who not only instructs, but also models, supports, and attunes to the child's way of experiencing and perceiving reality.

Research conducted by Lori A. Zoller and Suzanne Macari indicates that preschool-aged children with ASD are more likely to initiate eye contact and respond to an adult's facial expressions when the adult adjusts the intensity and rhythm of expression to the child's mode of sensory processing.[30] Adapting the style of communication—such as using a slower pace, neutral intonation, and limiting distracting stimuli—can foster the building of trust and increase a child's readiness to cooperate.

In Polish primary and special schools, there is an obligation to individualize the teaching process, which is reflected, among other things, in Article 44c (1)(2) of the Education Law Act (Journal of Laws 2023, item 900), which stipulates the duty to adapt teaching methods and forms of work to the psychophysical needs of the student.[31] In practice, this also entails the necessity of building relationships as an element supporting communication and the emotional development of students with ASD. It is also extremely important to take into account the sensory specificity of students on the autism spectrum. Hypersensitivity to sounds, light, or touch may cause attempts by a teacher to establish a relationship – although intentionally positive – to be perceived as overwhelming or threatening. For this reason, the relationship with a student on the spectrum should be based on patient

[27] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Arlington, VA 2013, pp. 50–51.

[28] S. Baron-Cohen, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, Oxford 2008, pp. 87–89.

[29] M. Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 44–47.

[30] L.A. Zoller, S. Macari, *Social attention in toddlers with autism*, "Development and Psychopathology" 2019, No. 31(2), pp. 675–678.

[31] Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. – Prawo oświatowe (Dz.U. 2023, poz. 900), art. 44c ust. 1 pkt 2.

observation and attunement, rather than on assumptions derived from neurotypical development. In accordance with the relational approach, the responsibility for creating the conditions in which a relationship can emerge rests with the teacher. As noted by Hanna Olechnowicz, the pedagogical relationship is not static – it requires continuous construction, development, and maintenance, particularly in work with students on the autism spectrum, where this process may take longer but yields significant effects in the form of increased trust, improved emotional functioning, and greater readiness to learn.[32]

The role of the special education teacher in building relationships

Within the relational approach, the special education teacher fulfils not only the role of an instructor, but above all that of a person who establishes and maintains a bond with the student, which constitutes the foundation of effective teaching and developmental support. This relationship is particularly important in the case of students on the autism spectrum, who experience difficulties in understanding social intentions, nonverbal communication, or emotional expression. By attempting to enter into a relationship with such a student, the teacher becomes a "bridge" between the student's inner world and the external reality of the school environment.[33] The literature identifies a range of competencies necessary for building effective relationships with students with special educational needs. Among the most important are: empathy (the ability to recognize the student's emotions and states), didactic flexibility (modifying teaching methods according to the student's needs), the ability to engage in active listening, emotional self-awareness, and patience.[34] It is also important to understand the sensory and communication processes characteristic of individuals with ASD – such as preferences regarding physical distance, tone of voice, pace of speech, and responses to stimuli.[35]

Research conducted by Robert MacKenzie and Chris Williams demonstrates that a positive teacher–student relationship in inclusive classrooms correlates with better outcomes in prosocial behavior and greater independence among students with autism.[36] In practice, this means that the teacher should go beyond standard didactic frameworks – devoting time to conversation, shared rituals, supporting emotional regulation, and responding to challenging behaviors not as "didactic

[32] H. Olechnowicz, *Dialog, rozwój, wychowanie*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 96–99.

[33] *Ibidem*.

[34] M.J. Guralnick, *Why early intervention works*, "Infants & Young Children" 2011, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 15–16.

[35] S. Rogers, G. Dawson, L. Vismara, *Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Guide to Early Intervention*, New York 2012, pp. 102–105.

[36] R. MacKenzie, C. Williams, *The impact of teacher-child relationships*, "Educational Psychology" 2021, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 635–637.

obstacles," but as signals of the student's needs. In accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the organization of psychological and pedagogical support[37] (Dz.U. 2017, poz. 1591), the special education teacher is required to co-develop individual educational and therapeutic programs (IEPs) and to participate in teams planning student support. This means that the teacher–student relationship should not only be personal in nature but also systemically supported – through the actions of teams of teachers, specialists, and parents.[38] An important aspect is also professional reflexivity – the readiness for self-reflection and for learning from the relationship with the student.

As emphasized by Danuta Elsner, an effective teacher does not limit themselves to the role of a provider of knowledge or support services, but actively participates in the relationship with the student, co-creating the conditions for the student's development while simultaneously learning through reflection on their own actions.[39]

In the educational process of students on the autism spectrum, the teacher/special education teacher performs a multidimensional role that goes beyond the traditional understanding of the educator's function. Their task is to shape a relational environment in which the student not only acquires knowledge but also experiences themselves as a person who is understood and accepted. A key competence of the special education teacher thus becomes the ability to observe social processes occurring in the classroom and to recognize subtle signals coming from the student – often nonverbal, irregular, and requiring interpretation within the context of the autistic way of experiencing relationships.[40] Moreover, the teacher should possess the ability for self-reflection and the conscious management of their own presence within the relationship, which includes, among other things, attentiveness to the impact of their own emotions, communication style, and even the organization of space on the quality of contact with the student. In this perspective, the relationship is not a set of techniques, but a dynamic process in which both parties influence one another – requiring both professionalism and a readiness for authentic encounter.[41]

As noted by Karen Guldberg, building a relationship with a child on the autism spectrum does not consist in "teaching social skills" in isolation from real-life contexts, but rather in creating conditions in which these skills can emerge in a natural

[37] Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie zasad udzielania pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej w publicznych przedszkolach, szkołach i placówkach (Dz.U. 2017, poz. 1591).

[38] Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 28 lipca 2020 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych, niedostosowanych społecznie oraz zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym § 6.1 (Dz.U. 2020, poz. 1309).

[39] D. Elsner, *Kompetencje nauczyciela wobec wyzwań współczesnej szkoły*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 111–114.

[40] L. Holliday Willey, *Pretending to Be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome*, London 1999, pp. 83–85.

[41] J. Nind, *Inclusive Education: Making Sense of Everyday Practice*, London 2020, pp. 147–150.

and meaningful way.[42] In turn, Craig Goodall emphasizes that a relational teacher is a person who recognizes the impact of the school system on the individual and is able to act consciously in favour of an inclusive classroom environment.[43]

Thus, the role of the special education teacher within the relational approach consists not only in supporting the student, but also in initiating processes that transform the educational environment toward greater openness, empathy, and social sensitivity. It is precisely the quality of the relationship established by the educator with the student that constitutes the real foundation of effective education and inclusion. In this perspective, the ability to accompany, attune, understand, and co-participate becomes not an addition to the work of the special education teacher, but its very core.[44]

Practical examples of the application of the relational approach

The relational approach is not merely a theoretical construct – it finds broad application in educational practice, particularly in work with students on the autism spectrum. Its fundamental assumption – that individual development occurs within the context of interpersonal bonds – is implemented through specific strategies, methods, and forms of practice that place the teacher–student relationship at the centre of educational and therapeutic activities.[45]

One of the most well-known and extensively researched relationship-based methods is the DIR/Floortime model (Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based Model), developed by Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder. It assumes that a child's development occurs through emotionally meaningful interaction with an adult who "enters the child's world" and supports the child by following their initiatives.[46] In school practice, this approach is implemented through the teacher's engagement in the child's symbolic world of play, the construction of shared attention, the establishment of stable frameworks for communication and contact, and the treatment of interaction as an end in itself rather than merely a tool for achieving curricular objectives.

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[42] K. Guldberg, *Developing Inclusive Practice for Young Children with Autism: A Model for Training Early Years Professionals*, "Early Child Development and Care" 2010, No. 180(9), pp. 1203–1211.

[43] C. Goodall, *Inclusion is a Feeling, Not a Place: A Qualitative Study Exploring Autistic Young People's Conceptualisations of Inclusion*, "International Journal of Inclusive Education" 2018, No. 22(10), pp. 1116–1130.

[44] A.M. Nowicka, *Relacyjność w edukacji – wyzwanie dla nauczyciela w przestrzeni szkoły włączającej* [in:] *Edukacja włączająca w teorii i praktyce*, eds. A. Krause, D. Wajsprych, Poznań 2021, pp. 101–105.

[45] M. Głodkowska, *Zrozumieć innego człowieka – edukacja w podejściu relacyjnym* [in:] *Relacje w edukacji włączającej*, eds. A. Krause, A. M. Nowicka, Poznań 2022, pp. 59–66.

[46] S.I. Greenspan, S. Wieder, *Engaging Autism: Using the Floortime Approach to Help Children Relate, Communicate, and Think*, Cambridge, MA 2006, pp. 57–63.

Another example of a relational model of practice is SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support). It is a comprehensive system for supporting children with ASD in educational settings, based on collaboration among teachers, specialists, and parents. The SCERTS model emphasizes the development of communication and emotional competencies through everyday educational and social situations, rather than exclusively during therapeutic sessions.[47] Importantly, this model is recommended by many European educational systems as an alternative to strictly behavioural interventions, which often fail to take into account the emotional context of development. In Polish schools, the RDI method – Relationship Development Intervention – is also increasingly being used. It involves the creation of so-called shared relational experiences, in which the adult models social behaviours for the child while simultaneously adapting to the child's abilities and needs. RDI is based on the hypothesis that the primary deficit in autism is not language or behavior, but rather the capacity for cooperation and shared attention with another person.[48] In the school context, this involves, among other things, working in pairs, building shared rituals, and planning everyday activities as joint actions rather than tasks performed "for the child." Under this assumption, the student on the autism spectrum is expected to be an active participant and co-creator of the relationship, rather than its passive recipient.

In Poland, many special and inclusive schools implement the relational approach within the framework of internal support programs. Increasingly, so-called "relationship zones" are being created – designated areas within the school environment (e.g., in the classroom or hallway) that enable students with ASD to engage in calm and predictable interactions with the teacher, thereby fostering a sense of safety and supporting emotional regulation.[49] It is also worth emphasizing the importance of the relational approach in everyday teaching practice – even beyond specialized methods. Teachers who intentionally begin lessons with brief conversations with students, employ drama-based methods, project-based learning, or "gratitude circles" strengthen students' sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and attentiveness to others. Such practices, although not necessarily formally included in the curriculum, constitute tangible expressions of relational pedagogy.

Summary

The relational approach in special education is not merely one of many theoretical concepts, but rather emerges as a coherent and ethically grounded response to the complex developmental needs of students on the autism spectrum.

[47] B.M. Prizant, A.M. Wetherby, E. Rubin, A.C. Laurent, *The SCERTS Model: A Comprehensive Educational Approach for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, Baltimore 2006, pp. 42–47.

[48] S.E. Gutstein, *The RDI Book: Forging New Pathways for Autism, Asperger's and PDD with the Relationship Development Intervention Program*, Houston 2009, pp. 91–94.

[49] *Raport: Efektywność indywidualizacji w pracy z uczniem z ASD*, Warszawa 2021, pp. 33–36.

An analysis of contemporary pedagogical, psychological, and interdisciplinary perspectives clearly indicates that the teacher–student relationship plays a fundamental role in the educational process. Its significance extends beyond academic achievement to encompass key aspects of student functioning, including emotional regulation, a sense of safety, motivation to learn, and readiness to participate in social relationships.

An effective pedagogical relationship, grounded in trust, empathy, attentiveness, and the stable presence of the teacher, becomes for a student with ASD an important point of reference and a source of regulatory support. Relationality does not imply a reduction of educational expectations or a withdrawal from curricular goals; rather, it situates them within a framework of partnership, dialogue, individualization, and respect for the student's subjectivity. As demonstrated by relational models such as DIR/Floortime, SCERTS, and RDI, it is possible to implement educational and support strategies that integrate developmental objectives with authentic interpersonal encounters, thereby fostering meaningful and sustainable learning.

Within this perspective, the role of the special education teacher undergoes a significant redefinition. Instead of functioning solely as a transmitter of knowledge or an implementer of curricular requirements, the teacher becomes a companion in the student's process of development, maturation, and exploration of the world. The teacher assumes the role of a mediator between the student and the educational environment – a "bridge" connecting the student's individual way of experiencing reality with social and school-related expectations. Relational competencies, such as the ability to attune, engage in reflective practice, demonstrate empathy, and maintain emotional presence, acquire a status equal to that of substantive professional knowledge.

In the context of the Polish educational system, the implementation of a relational approach requires further consistent and systemic actions. These include, among others, the development of teachers' relational competencies through training and supervision, the creation of spaces conducive to relationship-building (such as quiet zones or support rooms), the strengthening of the role of the support teacher, and the inclusion of a relational component within individual educational and therapeutic programs. While existing legal frameworks provide formal support for such initiatives, it is everyday school practice that ultimately determines the quality and effectiveness of their implementation.

In conclusion, the relationship is not an addition to the educational process – it constitutes its core. It is within the relational space that the potential for genuine social participation, agency, self-determination, and a dignified quality of life for students on the autism spectrum is realized. For this reason, modern special education should not merely acknowledge the relational dimension of education, but rather adopt it as a fundamental point of reference and a starting point for further theoretical reflection and practical development.

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