

Some Theoretical Considerations on the Interdependence of a Sense of Community and Social Participation from an Educational Perspective

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Abstract

The article presents a theoretical analysis of the relationship between a sense of community and social participation in the context of education. The starting point is a reflection on contemporary interpretations of the concept of community—from classical communitarianism to Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribalism. An attempt was made to compare two approaches to community: Wojciszke's psychological model of agency and community, and McMillan and Chavis's concept of a sense of community. The importance of shaping a sense of community as an essential component of education for the social participation of children and young people is emphasized. Areas of pedagogical activity that can support the development of social competences and involvement in community life are proposed.

Keywords: **Community, sense of community, social participation, education.**

Kilka teoretycznych rozważań o współzależności poczucia wspólnotowości i partycypacji społecznej w perspektywie edukacyjnej

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia teoretyczną analizę zależności między poczuciem wspólnotowości a partycypacją społeczną w kontekście edukacyjnym. Punktem wyjścia jest refleksja nad współczesnymi interpretacjami pojęcia wspólnoty — od klasycznego komunitaryzmu po koncepcję neo-trybalizmu Maffesoli'ego. Podjęto próbę zestawienia dwóch podejść do wspólnotowości: psychologicznego modelu sprawczości i wspólnotowości autorstwa Wojciszke oraz koncepcji poczucia wspólnotowości McMillana i Chavisa. Podkreślono znaczenie kształtowania poczucia wspólnotowości jako istotnego komponentu edukacji do partycypacji społecznej dzieci i młodzieży. Zaproponowano obszary działań pedagogicznych, które mogą wspierać rozwój kompetencji społecznych oraz zaangażowania w życie wspólnotowe.

Słowa kluczowe: **Wspólnota, poczucie wspólnotowości, partycypacja społeczna, edukacja.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Polish pedagogical research reveals various approaches to the issues of community and sense of community, focusing, for example, on the sense of community among residents of small local communities (Muszyńska, 2014; 2020), descriptions of local communities (Naumiuk, 2014), or community as an individual orientation (Peret-Drażewska, 2014). When considering the issues of community and sense of community, it is impossible to ignore the question of the very essence of community and its contemporary interpretation. Therefore, selected schools of thought—communitarianism and tribalism—which offer a different perspective on the relationship between the individual and the community, have also become an important theme in these considerations.

The article discusses two directions of theoretical analysis. The first is based on the concept of community as an individual orientation, proposed by Wojciszke (2010), while the second concerns the sense of community as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Despite theoretical differences, both approaches share a common assumption: they emphasize the importance of the individual's orientation towards other members of the social group. In this context, the category of social participation also appears, understood as active participation—more or less direct—in community life.

From a pedagogical perspective, social participation is an important factor in the development of social competences, which is confirmed by both psychological and educational research (Law, 2002; Bedell & Dumas, 2004; Jarosz, 2018). The aim of this article is to show the importance of a sense of community as a theoretical construct in the context of education for social participation. The conclusions presented are part of a reflection on the educational impact aimed at shaping awareness of the importance of social participation as an element of child and youth development. Potential areas of pedagogical activity that could form the basis of educational programs in both formal and non-formal education will also be indicated.

2. INTERPRETATIONS OF COMMUNITY

The concepts of community and a sense of community are an important part of an individual's experience—they express their emotional needs, desire for security, and belonging. Community is understood as a space of trust and kindness where people feel accepted. In the context of the dynamic changes of the modern world, the question arises: is it possible today to talk about communities and community spirit, and if so, in what sense?

Communitarianism, as a classical concept, perceives the individual as a subject embedded in a community structure. Their identity is constructed through reference to the community, and the individual's actions—resulting from identification with a specific group—lead to the realization of the common good (Taylor, 2001, MacIntyre, 1996, Sandel, 2009). In this view, the individual does not function in isolation, but develops within the framework of relationships with others, which enable self-knowledge and self-determination. Such “anchoring” in a group is a key element of the individual's identity.

Tribalism literally comes from “tribe” and was initially used to describe the organization of social life in tribes, especially in traditional societies, where blood ties, language, and territory determined membership. In the 20th century, the term began to be used metaphorically in relation to modern societies and meant any strong group loyalty that places the interests of “our group” above common, universal, or national interests. Michel Maffesoli (2008), writing about “neo-tribes”—new tribes in postmodern societies—emphasizes that people voluntarily form groups based on lifestyle or tastes rather than kinship. Maffesoli's (2008) neo-tribalism therefore proposes a more fluid and diverse approach to community. Communities—or rather “tribes”—are unstable and changeable, and individuals participate in them by playing social roles. Maffesoli thus emphasizes the importance of the affective dimension of social life, referred to as the “emotional nebula,” and the role of empathy and emotion in community building. In his view, community is no longer a stable structure, but a dynamic, emotional bond based on shared experience and symbolic participation.

In this context, it is worth recalling the distinction between communities of descent and communities of assent—in the latter, shared values, beliefs, and actions are more important than objective characteristics.

Both the assumptions of communitarianism and tribalism can be seen in contemporary thinking about education. Communitarianism, as a trend in political and social thought, emphasizes above all the importance of communities (family, local, cultural, civic, etc.) for the constitution of the individual: their values, identity, duties, and social relations. Hence, in education, communitarianism is associated with the formation of community virtues, a sense of duty towards the local community, dialogue, social responsibility, and social bonds. Tribalism, on the other hand, which by definition refers to a strong emotional loyalty to one's own group (tribe, ethnic, social, cultural group), is often associated with rejection or counterbalance to other groups. In educational contexts, tribalism is therefore often associated with ethnic/regional identity, tradition, as well as issues of segregation, isolation of minority groups, or lack of acceptance of values outside the group. From the perspective of contemporary education, Maffesoli's (2008) neo-tribalism is more relevant to the needs of students and their functioning. Neo-tribalism can strengthen students' sense of belonging, which has a positive effect on motivation, satisfaction with being in a group, and emotional well-being. They can also support creativity, because interest-based “tribes” encourage the sharing of ideas, passions, and projects. They can also provide alternative learning spaces (outside of formal schooling), which is valuable in times of changing needs, media, and technologies.

3. COMMUNITY AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY – TWO THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Wojciszke (2010), referring to earlier studies, showed that most judgments about people, groups, and the “self” can be reduced to two dimensions of individual orientation: agency and community. Agency is interpreted as effectiveness, competence, and efficiency, while community is interpreted as morality, cordiality, and relationality. Wojciszke (2010) assumed that moral judgments (community) take precedence in everyday assessments of other people, that people look first at community – “is he good, honest, trustworthy”. Agency (competence), on the other hand, is assessed second (“can he achieve the goal”). In the case of self-assessment, the opposite hierarchy is observed. In self-assessment, people place greater emphasis on agency – that is, they perceive themselves as effective (“I know how,” “I can”) rather than communal (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). The author also considers the relationship between agency and communality on several levels: semantic (reference to the same descriptors), at the level of perception of individual acts of behavior, at the level of a group of people (whether people perceived as agents are perceived as communal), at the level of the perception of social groups (whether attributing a high level of agency to groups is associated with a high or low level of communality). The research concerns the identification and interpretation of an individual’s behaviors and actions in the relationship between the agent of the actions and the recipient of the actions, on the basis of which individuals are described as agentic or communal. Agency thus refers to a focus on oneself and one’s own goals, while communality refers to a focus on others and social relationships. The two orientations are not opposed but complementary. People with a high communality orientation are characterized by a greater need for affiliation, care for others, willingness to cooperate, and involvement in interpersonal relationships.

Although Wojciszke developed this theory in social psychology, its two dimensions permeate pedagogy in the aspect of teacher and student evaluation: students evaluate the teacher first in terms of relatedness (whether they are kind and fair) and only then in terms of agency (whether they are competent and teach well); building authority: teachers need to be both competent (agency) and empathetic, fair (community); and student development: schools can develop agency (initiative, effectiveness, responsibility for action) and community (ability to cooperate, empathy, prosociality) in children. Research on agency and community and their importance in education is multifaceted, largely focusing on the importance of both orientations in school learning.

The sense of community is a subject of interest to researchers in many scientific disciplines, particularly social psychologists. Drawing on the experiences of other researchers, McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose their own concept of defining the sense of community and a theory of sense of community. The authors, following Gusfield (1975), define the concept of community in territorial and geographical terms (neighborhood, city, town) and in relational terms (the quality of interpersonal relationships) as mutually complementary categories, they propose four criteria for the definition and theory of a sense of community.

The first dimension they consider is “membership”. McMillan and Chavis propose that membership has five characteristics: boundaries, emotional security, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment (emotional commitment of individuals), and a shared system of symbols. The second dimension of community and sense of community is “influence”, interpreted in two ways: as the influence of the individual on the group, thus emphasizing the role of the subject in the functioning of the group, and as the influence of the group on the individual, with reference to the processes of socialization, adaptation, culturalization, or acculturation. The reciprocity of influence between the two participants, subjects (individual and group) of this social relationship, allows for the development of specific norms of group functioning, which are necessary for group cohesion. The third dimension proposed by McMillan and Chavis is integration and satisfaction of needs, which they consider to be the motivation for individual behavior, stating that people do what serves to fulfill their needs. The awareness of an individual’s belonging to a group of people who share their views, values, and have similar needs, priorities, and goals reinforces their belief that together they are better able to fulfill these needs. Therefore, in order to create a stronger bond between people, the community must fulfill the needs of its members, rewarding them in a specific way. The last dimension of the theory of community spirit considered by the authors concerns the emotional connection between the individual and the group, manifested in the sharing of common experiences. Sharing common experiences is partly based on a shared history, family biography, and place biography. However, McMillan and Chavis do not consider it necessary for members to participate fully in history, but they must identify with it. Their theory of community is based on the assumption that all dimensions of community are interdependent and that their internal dynamics determine the existence and sustainability of community.

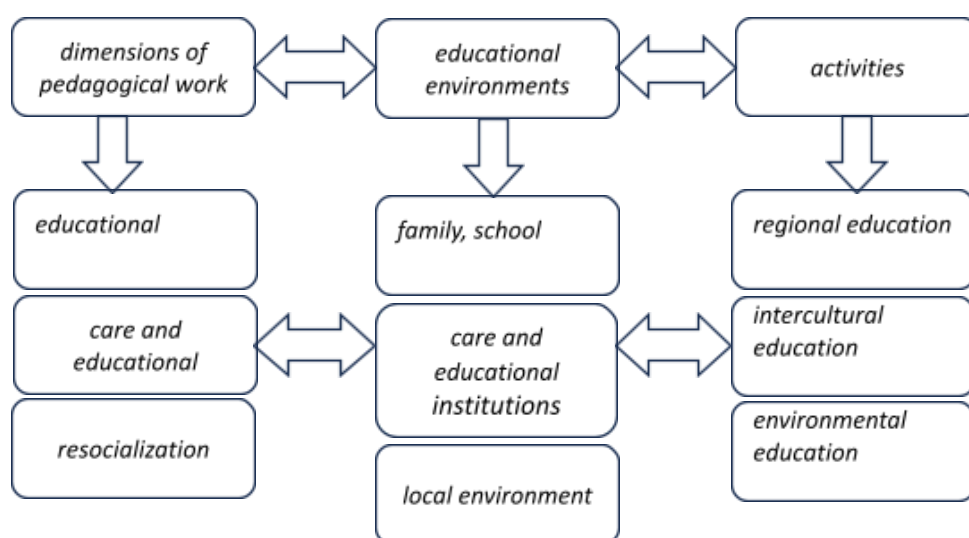
The PISA 2022 study showed that Polish students “perform very poorly” in the following areas: sense of belonging to school, agency in independent learning, and life satisfaction. Research by Pei et al. (2024) conducted in the context of the learning community indicates that students consider a sense of community to be important for social bonds and better learning. First, they emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities conducted by teachers as part of the university program in building a sense of community. Second, according to students, group activities significantly sustain a sense of community, strengthening their mutual motivation to achieve academic success. A holistic analysis of the perspectives of students and teachers suggests that in striving to build a sense of community, the group, the program, and the university as a whole should be taken into account. The study therefore points to the importance of both agency and community, as well as a sense of community, as factors that enhance the effectiveness of the educational process.

Both concepts, although rooted in different theoretical traditions, emphasize the importance of the individual's focus on social relations, cooperation, and mutual interaction. They therefore provide a valuable framework for considering social participation and the role of education in supporting it.

4. CREATING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AS AN EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

A sense of community plays a key role in activating individuals. Therefore, in every dimension of pedagogical work—educational, preventive, and rehabilitative—and in every educational environment—family, institutional, local—there is a need to consciously create it. Educational activities should focus, among other things, on: developing communication skills, building cooperation and collaboration skills, strengthening ties with the place (school, neighborhood, region), shaping motivation for social activity, and moving from competition to cooperation as the dominant model of interaction.

Figure 1 *Educational activities aimed at creating a sense of community*



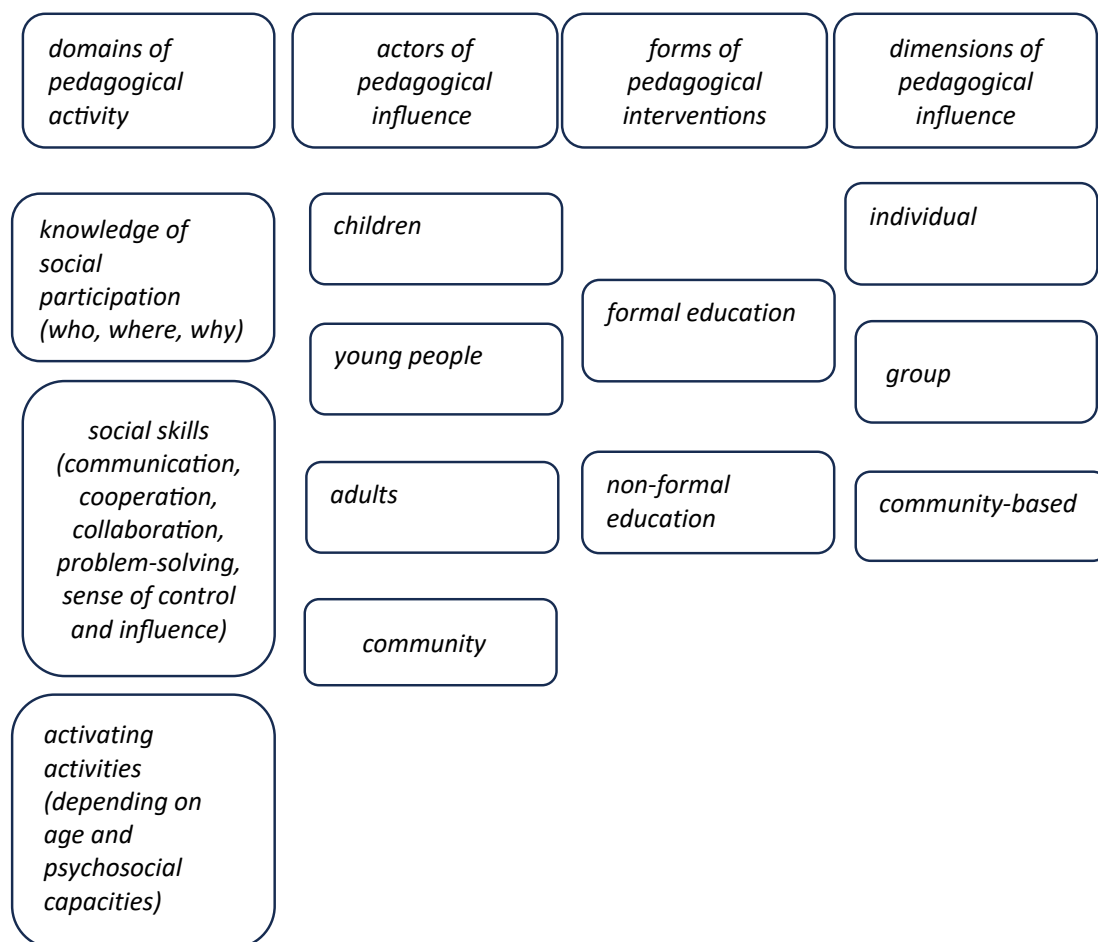
Building a sense of community is the foundation for civic and social education—it determines the development of the individual as an active member of the community. If we understand education as mutual influence and interaction aimed at both creating conditions for development and developing the individual, then regardless of whether this influence and interaction is individual or group-based, formal or informal, it always requires the participation of two entities: the teacher and the student. Education is therefore a process built on mutual relations, and every relationship requires at least a minimum of commitment from both sides. Education (civic, environmental, regional) which constitutes activity and action as goals and consequences of this process, provides the basis for building a community.

5. AREAS OF PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCE IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Preparing for active participation in social life is one of the key challenges of contemporary pedagogy. The relationship between the level of knowledge and readiness to participate has been confirmed in studies by Kaufman and Poulin (1994), among others, who identified three important factors: accessibility, willingness, and knowledge about opportunities for participation. Educational activities in this area should include: providing knowledge about existing social organizations and their goals, shaping motivation to act and showing the personal and social benefits of activity, developing skills: communication, cooperation, self-organization, decision-making, and introducing activating activities—taking into account the age and abilities of students. The literature also emphasizes the importance of changing the approach to children and young people as social actors. Jarosz (2018) points to the need to move from an attitude of protection to social recognition. A child is not only the object of influence, but a full participant in the community, co-creating relationships and taking action.

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Figure 2 *Areas of pedagogical influence in the field of social participation*



The concepts of participation and social participation are treated as synonyms by many authors and researchers. In pedagogical literature, social participation is most often interpreted as a concept of social integration and inclusion or social activity. In general, social participation can be understood as social involvement, social activity, or the level of engagement in social life. Social participation interpreted as social involvement is the domain of researchers addressing the issues of the democratization of social life. In this interpretation, social involvement assumes the right of the individual to decide on their identity, belonging, and self-development (Evans et al., 2010), emphasizing the importance of self-determination, the possibility of choosing forms of involvement, and the possibility of developing social capital. Social participation understood as social involvement concerns all levels of social life: micro (family, class, school); meso (local community); macro (society of a given country). The interpretation of social participation as social activity refers primarily to social interactions (Koster et al., 2008). Hence, social participation is also understood as positive social contact, social relations and interactions, participation in volunteering, or involvement in local activities. Social engagement, as another way of understanding social participation, can take on different levels: from the most general—social engagement as relationships with other people, being among other people, through cooperation with others, helping activities, to cooperation in the community, being an active member of an organization (Levasseur, 2010). Each of the above-defined ways of interpreting social participation contains its rudimentary assumption: relationships, social interactions, cooperation, and collaboration, which require a specific range of competences acquired not only in everyday life, but also through deliberate and conscious educational activities undertaken in formal (e.g., school) or informal learning. Research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs (2024) indicates that 68% of young Poles feel responsible for their environment, but only 44% believe that they have a real impact. Despite this, 69% would like to have a say in public affairs. The main barriers are: lack of knowledge, discouragement, and lack of trust in institutions. The study emphasizes the role of school as a place where participatory education can (or should) begin—not only through social studies lessons, but also through engaging practices (participatory budgets, simulations, local activities). Baranowski and Markowska-Manista (2024) express a similar opinion. The authors present social participation as an element of education based on the values of social justice. They argue that the real involvement of students in decision-making processes at school contributes to building agency, responsibility, and cooperation. They point out that the current model of education often marginalizes the voices of children and young people, treating them as objects of pedagogical activities. The authors propose

a transition to a pedagogy of dialogue and co-decision-making and the implementation of participatory practices from an early age, e.g., student councils, consultations on school space design, and public debates. The educational dimension should be focused not only on knowledge but also on the real experience of being part of a community.

6. CONCLUSION

Both community spirit and social participation are key categories for the personal and social development of individuals. Their interdependence, embedded in a specific educational context, requires a reflective approach and conscious pedagogical action. Creating a sense of community and supporting the social activity of young people should become one of the main goals of education in the 21st century—education for responsibility, cooperation, and engagement. The theoretical considerations presented above show that a sense of community plays an important role in shaping attitudes conducive to social participation. Both the communitarian and neo-tribalist approaches provide valuable interpretative frameworks for understanding the dynamics of individual–group relations in an educational context. A sense of community, understood as emotional identification with a group, strengthens motivation to act for the common good and promotes social activity. From a pedagogical perspective, the creation of community should be a conscious and planned element of educational work, based on building relationships, developing social competences, and strengthening the identity of the individual in the context of the community. Education for social participation, treated as a process of shaping conscious and engaged citizens, therefore requires not only the transfer of knowledge, but also the creation of space for active participation and cooperation in various social environments. Educational activities should be aimed at developing communication skills, cooperation, and social responsibility, as well as supporting students' internal motivation to engage in community life, as well as creating specific teaching and educational solutions that support the development of community spirit as an essential element of civic and social education.

An analysis of Polish pedagogical literature indicates significant gaps in research on students' social activity and engagement. Research on the participation of children and young people shows that despite the growing number of initiatives involving children and young people, and despite the existence of formal participatory structures, their actual influence on decisions is often limited (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2021). It would therefore be worthwhile to find out the reasons for this state of affairs. In addition, as educators, we lack comparative research on the social participation of children and young people in Poland and around the world. Analyses also point to the need for further pedagogical research on the sense of community, agency, and communality as individual orientations and their significance in the education process.

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