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# Freedom and Responsibility in the Everyday Life of a Student

## ABSTRACT

When addressing topics related to values in people's everyday lives, one cannot rest at solely theoretical considerations. The challenge for all those working with other people, and especially for parents, teachers, and educators, is to seek ways to introduce adolescents to the practice of values. The following text constitutes an attempt to reflect on the relationship between freedom and responsibility in the context of education. We understand maturity, among other things, as the ability to find ourselves in spaces of freedom and responsibility; to be able to pursue it, though, each of us must be able to experience these spaces from an early age.

Looking at how the modern education system operates, the author attempts to determine whether a young person can find answers to questions of what freedom is and how to understand it at school. Do the students have a sense of self-determination and responsibility for their educational progress and, if so, to what extent? By analyzing the literature and describing selected elements of grassroots activities of teachers and people involved in the discussion of the shape of education, the author tries to find out whether school can contribute to explaining and implementing attitudes based on freedom and responsibility and, if so, to what extent. The changes taking place in today's society require the formation of competences related to life-long learning, and this calls for self-awareness and the ability to make decisions and take responsibility for them.

## KEYWORDS

freedom, responsibility,  
trust, school, student

SPI Vol. 23, 2020/1  
ISSN 2450-5358  
e-ISSN 2450-5366  
DOI: 10.12775/SPI.2020.1.002  
Submitted: 14.01.2020  
Accepted: 31.03.2020

## Introduction

The various phenomena and changes that have accompanied us over the past few decades have greatly contributed to lively discussions about rediscovering and redefining values. Many outstanding scholars and researchers are contemplating this topic (including Krystyna Chałas, Kazimierz Denek, Janusz Homplewicz, Katarzyna Olbrycht, and Krystyna Ostrowska). We desperately need scientific conferences, symposia, and debates to encourage reflection on the human confusion in the axionormative chaos. When addressing topics related to values in everyday human life, one cannot limit oneself solely to theoretical considerations. The challenge for everyone who works with others—especially for parents, teachers, and educators—is to look for ways to involve young people in practicing values.

What is freedom? How is responsibility manifested? Can you learn it? How? Who should take on this mission? There is probably no single correct, sufficient answer to these questions. This paper is an attempt to look at whether and how the guidelines and theoretical reflections translate into everyday educational practice and whether and to what extent the student has the opportunity for self-assertion and participation in the responsibility for their own educational process.

Contemporary school is no longer the basic place and source of knowledge for a student. As a link in the complex educational process, the school is becoming more an arena of designing opportunities and creating chances to unleash the potential of human possibilities through the constant confrontation of a person (student) with various tasks. (Tchorzewski, 1993, p. 107)

These words of Andrzej M. de Tchorzewski were published many years ago, so it is worth asking today, does the contemporary school take up this challenge on both the didactic and character-shaping levels?

## The student and their possibilities for self-determination in the educational process

Today, more than ever before, it is important for us to be able to teach the young generation to organize their own educational setting, to design their own career path, and to prepare them for understanding, and then embodying, lifelong learning. *Lifelong learning* is based on the idea that people continue to learn and improve their qualifications even after completing their formal education. Two of the important elements of this process are agency and self-determination. However, looking at how schools work today, the question arises of whether it is possible to practice this skill during the educational process at school.

Literature on education abounds in texts indicating how vital it is to create an environment in which a student can learn to make decisions independently, define the space of their activity and experience, and build a sense of responsibility for their own growth and for their choices. Danuta Michałowska notes that education

at school consists not only in education, i.e., acquiring knowledge and skills—especially cognitive ones—but also in upbringing, i.e., the process of shaping an autonomous person. This process relies on stimulating the subjectivity and independence of the individual so that they can actively and, moreover, creatively adapt to existing living conditions, and then change them using the acquired knowledge and skills and their creative potential. The purpose of educational interactions is also to develop skills in making choices based on ethical and rational premises. Therefore, developing responsibility for their consequences is not without significance. (Michałowska, 2013, p. 61)

Bogdan Suchodolski stated

that freedom is not a future that will come in a distant and happy time for all people, but that it is a reality which is constantly attained thanks to the convergence of objective conditions, creating possibilities of freedom, with the subjective experience of a human being who realizes this possibility. (Suchodolski, 1975, p. 138)

It cannot be expected, therefore, that a child, who has no experience in this matter, will acquire the capability to understand and exercise freedom, or to develop an attitude of responsibility, at an indefinite time. Childhood and adolescence is a time when adults

should create a safe space for young people to practice decision-making and to take responsibility for these decisions by experiencing the various consequences.

However, children and adolescents are increasingly micro-managed by adults, both parents and teachers. Most of them live according to strictly set daily schedules that kill self-reliance, creativity, and a sense of agency. The everyday life of a large group of students is designed by adults.

Teachers commonly set goals for their students, dictate what they must do, set the criteria for assessing the effect achieved, and make evaluations. Anyway, this is usually expected. There is no place in an average school for students to construct their own goals, invent new forms of school activity, or learn without grades. There are signposts everywhere. (Pytlak, 2016, para. 5)

Contemporary education theory adopts the premise that “upbringing is based on freedom, that the educational process is a meeting of two freedoms, and respects the other person as such, as a freedom” (Śliwerski, 2001, p. 168), but in reality, the school system, is often unable to adhere to this guideline. Various factors contribute to this, ranging from the underfunding of education, through inadequate education of staff, the controversial core curriculum, human habits, or often repeated clichés such as, “It’s impossible!” In her valuable research, Ewa Jarosz demonstrated this problem. By discussing various studies conducted on the implementation and observance of children’s rights in education in recent years, she shows that

although in recent decades we have seen some improvement in the child’s position and relationships with teachers and educators, in terms of respecting the child’s subjectivity and their rights in Polish schools, much is left to be desired. This is true, especially if we consider those rights that especially accentuate the subjective dimension of the child, their dignity and equality, and the child’s participation in creating and influencing reality. (Jarosz, 2013, p. 50)

Attempting to define the term “upbringing,” Krystyna Chałas has stated that it involves “the recognition and affirmation of freedom, thanks to which both sides of the interaction can reveal and realize the values that give meaning to their lives”; in an atmosphere of understanding, dialogue, kindness, and openness, “they must acknowledge their own freedom and dignity, and show a sense of

responsibility, trust, and empathy” (Chafas, 2003, p. 7). This publication indicates one of the necessary elements in building relationships and becoming open to other people. Unfortunately, anonymity, haste, bureaucracy, the primacy of the curriculum, and the fight for the highest ranking—that is, the everyday life of most schools—seriously hinder the creation of space in which the freedom, autonomy, and self-determination of the student can be fostered. However,

as in the times of Korczak, the biggest barrier today in recognizing a child as an equal subject of education who deserves ... under natural law and the principles of social justice respect for their dignity and recognition of their subjectivity and sovereignty as an individual is an ideology of education—constantly present in the minds (and emotions) of many teachers, educators, and school principals (and parents)—which is based on authoritarianism, a peculiar “individual educational policy” that positions the child in relation to an adult, an educator, or teacher in terms of almost indisputable subordination and obedience. (Jarosz 2013, p. 56)

## In search of opportunities

The experience of a safe space in which a student can make decisions and risk failure is a very important element of the exercise in understanding such an abstract and elusive concept as freedom. Every realm of life requires one to make various decisions practically every day, and every decision is a risk. Suchodolski argued that “virtually each human step we take every day is such a choice, because it is a negation of possibilities other than those that were chosen. At any moment in our lives, we are condemned to a choice that determines our future” (Suchodolski, 1975, p. 138). In his further considerations, he also stresses that civilization provides people with many stimuli and opportunities of various kinds, and therefore demands active behavior in different situations. This intensification always requires a choice, from a plethora of stimuli, of only those that somehow suit us (Suchodolski, 1975, p. 144). Rapid technological advancement causes a considerable increase in the available opportunities. It is becoming harder to make decisions: we still want more and we want it immediately, and the ability to give up is always included in the choice. A young person at the age of 16 faces a choice that is the corner stone of their educational and then professional development.

Making such a decision is difficult and complicated. The presence of teachers, instructors, and people who guide and navigate the vast array of all the possibilities is very important. It should be emphasized that such expectations are inscribed into the newly defined role of the teacher. Guy Claxton, in an interview with Jordan Baker (Baker, 2018) suggests changing the name and the word “teacher” to “learning designer.”

Getting to know oneself, attuning oneself to one’s needs, and setting one’s own goals constitute a chance for conscious self-determination in adulthood. In the article entitled “Personalized Learning Isn’t About Tech,” Paul France describes three important elements which he believes to be the key to success. One of them is giving students decision-making tools. He states that students should be able to choose what to learn and how during their education, although many teachers are afraid of this (France, 2018). France believes that clearly defined requirements and standards for passing classes allow us to create a framework for the student to decide independently and thus to personalize their learning process (2018). During both real and virtual meetings, we can easily come across discussions and heated debates on how to help develop attitudes based on values such as freedom and responsibility in the teacher–student relationship through activities in the everyday life of schools.

Such attitudes are also visible among the parents, who, more and more often, search for schools where their child can be educated in the spirit of subjectivity and freedom, to develop and acquire knowledge and new skills. They want the priority in their children’s education to shift from learning encyclopedic content and passive acquisition of material to shaping attitudes and qualities such as activity, imagination, and a capacity for intellectual autonomy and continuous education (Kołaczek, 2004, p. 16–17). Recent years have brought great interest in home education and “democratic schools.” Home-schooling was virtually unknown just a few years ago and “functioned below the threshold of conscious awareness, not only for Polish public opinion, but also for professional educators” (Budajczak, 2004, p. 14). Currently, over 12,000 students use this form of education. In both homeschooling and democratic schools, it is the students who assume responsibility for their educational process. They decide how much time they will devote to specific topics, they set the priorities,

and they look for suitable methods and learning techniques. “Forest kindergartens” are also becoming more and more popular, not only because of the chance to have contact with nature, but also because

children receive respect and trust from their guardians and teachers. During their education, preschoolers develop independence in action and thinking, as well as creativity. By taking on challenges and risks when exploring the forest without restrictions, they raise their awareness of their capabilities. A child who received empathy and understanding in the kindergarten, who was allowed to freely express their opinion and be assertive, can successfully start school education. (Polski Instytut Przedszkoleń Leśnych, 2018, para. 2)

In a book published in 1975, Bogdan Suchodolski drew attention to what is still a very current issue:

what we need is to dynamize education, thanks to which the human mind would become open to scientific and technical progress, and would be able to participate in it. Such education is training intelligence, training thinking and learning skills, the need to verify one’s knowledge and refresh it. (Suchodolski, 1975, p. 141)

It seems that one of the people who are actively looking for ways to implement such education is Jarosław Pytlak, who shares his ideas, thoughts, and experience in his blog and entries in social media platforms. “For those thirsty for innovation—a Christmas gift” is an entry devoted to the method of setting educational requirements and assessing the effects of children’s learning which facilitates the child’s conscious participation in the teaching/learning process (Pytlak, 2019). There are more and more such active people, those who slowly try to modify the old-fashioned, rigid system from the bottom up. Thanks to their activity online, they reach many internet users—those who think in a similar way, those who hesitate, and those who do not perceive or understand the need for such changes. A space emerges for practitioners to discuss and look for ways to act, but also to support each other and give each other strength and encouragement when it seems we are fighting an uphill battle. Of course, there are already studies and ideas in pedagogy that champion the values related to freedom and responsibility. However, today we need to seek pedagogical modification and improvement because the challenges that parents, educators, and teachers face are very demanding. Marcin Stiburski, Tomasz Tokarz, Wojtek Gawlik, and many others

call practitioners to share thoughts and search for opportunities and ways to bring the beautiful ideas which have been preached for a long time to fruition in school practice. As Małgorzata Kunicka writes,

school as an institution should not deprive students of the possibility of expressing their individuality, of promoting their own way of thinking and valuing. In accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in addition to the right to safety, education, and healthcare, students also have the right to dignity, to shaping and expressing their views, to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. (Kunicka, 2012, p. 34)

In order for this to happen, teachers and educators must have the courage to take the risk of putting trust in a young person, by building a relationship with them, allowing them to experience freedom even in the area of their own education and development.

### Malort and Gratosfera—places where spontaneous fun is being rediscovered

Developing the skills of shaping autonomy and a sense of responsibility is not only difficult in the school environment, but also when organizing free time, which more and more belongs to young people only in theory. According to Johan Huizinga, “play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy” (Huizinga, 1985, p. 73). However, recent years have largely converted play into meticulously planned activities that are supposed to produce specific results or lead to specific goals. Fortunately, the idea of spontaneous fun is being rediscovered. André Stern points out that

children perceive things from a different perspective than adults, see them creatively, and thus assign them completely new functions and uses .... Children immersed in play, without even noticing, cross their own boundaries, which they would never have crossed if they had been ordered to play like that. (André Stern, 2017, pp. 33, 38)

Using his own example, he describes how a space that allows spontaneous play, autonomy in discovering and taking up specific actions, freedom from competition and grading, and—moreover—adults’



confidence in the child's potential all facilitate full and harmonious development (André Stern, 2016). In Poland, as in many other countries, there are workshops prepared according to the concept which was developed and practiced for many years by André's father, Arno Stern. A prominent educationalist, researcher of spontaneous creativity and children's play, and founder of the Malort painting workshop—which encourages children's free artistic expression, not subject to assessment, judgment, or the influence of adults—created the opportunity to give a child what a child's nature craves. "Today, even little children stand dispassionately in front of a piece of paper and do not know how to start. This is a very depressing sight. Accustomed to following instructions, they analyze whether an action is worth the reward" (Arno Stern, 2016). Freedom, authenticity, and the ability to decide allow children to build confidence, strengthen their internal motivation for being active, and stimulate curiosity.

In today's world, children are starting to lack places where they can engage in spontaneous play. In this context, a project introduced in Gdańsk primary schools which involves introducing children into the world of "spontaneous play," seems interesting. The project's website provides more information:

the project called GratoSfera was based on the Children Access to Play in School (CAPS) grant project, in consultation with the British organization Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL), a pioneer in the field of spontaneous play, and in collaboration with partners from five European Union countries under the Erasmus+ Program. (GratoSfera, n.d., p. 5)

Schools participating in the project organize a play space using various elements, such as pallets, baskets, sticks, unused plastic pipes, boxes, "adult" clothes, tires, barrels, and used electronic equipment, which are called "loose parts" (*"graty"*) on the project's website. The creators feel strongly that this type of activity becomes a time when a child freely chooses what they do and personally manages the fun, and that their actions are internally motivated. This means that children and young people define and control the content and intentions of their own play, guided by their own motives, ideas, and interests: they do it simply "in their own way" (GratoSfera, n.d., p. 3).

## Conclusion

The pedagogical literature cited in this article, intentionally collected from publications released many years ago, shows that as teachers and educators we can search for good examples of valuable sources of inspiration for our actions today. Despite the advanced (as it seems) awareness of how important it is in education to guide the student towards fulfilling values (freedom and responsibility), many difficulties are still visible in translating this into specific actions and attitudes. Perhaps a few interesting examples from daily practice will contribute to the emergence of more inspiring ideas. They may be helpful in overcoming the anxiety and fear associated with trusting students. Korczak's words—"we cannot change our adult lives, because we were brought up in captivity, we cannot give the child freedom as long as we are in chains" (Korczak, 1984, p. 187)—are once again a challenge for teachers and educators to find the courage to be free. Let us, as parents, teachers, and educators, allow children and teenagers to explore new spaces, to discover and study them on their own. The home is the first place where a child has the opportunity to experience freedom, decision-making, and self-determination. Home is also a place where, from an early age, a child should learn what consistency and responsibility are. If during childhood, and then during adolescence, there are no opportunities for independent decision-making or responsibility for one's decisions, then an adult will not cope with either freedom or responsibility. It is up to adults whether future generations will be equipped with these skills. The Polish school system should aspire to

make the curriculum not only about memorizing and checking tons of knowledge, but about educating young people who will be invited by "learning designers" to take part in modernly arranged projects in every subject and about helping them to bravely, artfully enter adult life. ([edukacja21], 2018)

The following statement of Maria Nowicka-Kozioł seems to be the appropriate conclusion of this discussion. She contends that

perhaps one should not be more afraid of "individualistic egoism" than of unreflective conformism and external steering. This is a risky judgment, but I mean to stress that we should employ strategies that help children determine their individual identity, by emphasizing the importance of

subjective self-determination, and subjective freedom of choice and responsibility. Following your own system of values which results from conscious, free decisions, a sense of independence from official authorities and commands is, it seems, the legitimate aim of the education of the young generation. I think that the danger of focusing on the “I” is no greater than the danger of mindlessly succumbing to group norms and of various authoritative opinions, the danger of jumping on the bandwagon, becoming an echo of tacky advertising and market influences. At the same time, it is necessary to educate and shape one’s character in such a way as to foster deep self-knowledge, thorough self-reflection, rational criticism, and some caution in adopting values and formulating judgments. Therefore, this is not an easy task, but it seems necessary. (Nowicka-Kozioł, 2005, p. 26)

Let these words be an inspiration for all who participate in education, to take action that supports young people in understanding and accepting the values of freedom and responsibility.

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