

CHANGING STUDENTS' POSITIONS AT THE EDUCATION TABLE – A POLISH PROJECT WHERE STUDENTS ACTED AS TEACHERS' REVIEWERS AND THE CONSEQUENCES THAT ENSUED

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Abstract

When schools were closed, the Polish government organized remote lessons broadcasted on public national TV. Without prior preparation and random teachers' appointments, the initial outcome elicited public ridicule. A TV competitor decided to arrange televised lessons of far better quality recorded by award-winning teachers. The atmosphere surrounding the preparations forced the project participants to be extra careful about any potential mistakes or even slips of the tongue. The need for excellence resulted in engaging a group of secondary school students as reviewers of the pre-recorded lessons. A multilevel process was developed in which the teachers obtained detailed editorial remarks that referred not only to the content side of the lessons but also to the technical aspects, the way it was presented and the way it might appeal to a student or could potentially be misunderstood at a given level of education. The teachers learnt to appreciate the feedback and – as a result – prepared much better lessons. The students helped them establish themselves in the new circumstances, aiding their expertise. The teachers opened themselves up to scrutiny and listened to the remarks, acknowledging the distinct perspective of the students. They were no longer an infallible oracle. Though no direct relationship was formed, some prerequisites of a meaningful, intellectual partnership were – the openness and willingness to listen to the other side of the educational table. Those prerequisites seem to be important aspects allowing for a dialogue of meanings and as such should be researched and sought on more regular basis in order to invite student engagement, agency and participation in the education process.

Keywords: teacher's role, teacher-student relations, the dialogue of meanings, student as intellectual partner, teacher's expertise, intentionality of the relationship

1. INTRODUCTION – THE BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

“Education is a multitude of activities. They are unplanned but can be spontaneous. On the other hand, they can be planned and systemic. Long-term and short-term. One-sided and multi-sided.” (Dziurzyński, 2012, p. 9). The project ‘First Viewers’ described in this article¹ was definitely spontaneous and constituted more of a response to a crisis rather than a systemic implementation. Nevertheless, in regards to its effects, it deserves a thorough analysis (and preferably duplication) as it may have uncovered some possible solutions to well-established problems in education – mostly the lack of student engagement, lack of their agency and lack of

¹ (in Polish: Pierwsi Widzowie) – the project where students from the 3rd secondary school in Gdynia reviewed the lessons recorded by the teachers for the purposes of the TV broadcast. <http://3-lab.pl/pierwsi-widzowie/>

meaningful relationships between teachers and students.

The lockdown caused by the pandemic in March 2020 (continued again from November 2020), made many of the problems that the education system had been suffering painfully acute. Children were told to sit at home, their exams postponed or cancelled², the lesson moved online while the teachers were unprepared to conduct them this way: there was chaos considering the form, the timeline, the way of transmission or the assessment. Still, the biggest problem turned out to be students' access to online education. It was not merely a question of strong enough internet connection but mostly of the equipment the child could have at his or her own disposal. Many families had only one computer at home and it was needed for the parents to work. The difficulty was enhanced by teachers communicating in many different forms, sending PDFs, Word documents, connecting via Teams or working in Google docs. Often the kids had no idea what is where, so the parents had to step in. Not all of them could, not all of them wanted to. Yet the teachers were still demanding answers, homework, tests, etc..

In order to help those kids who had no or limited access to online lessons, public national TV broadcasted lessons via their television channels³. The first lessons, due to their haphazard preparation and extremely limited recording time, were filled with errors and strange behaviour from the teachers, unaccustomed to the camera. The public criticisms was severe: the teachers were ridiculed and many memes were publicized in the aftermath. In such an atmosphere competing TV station – TVN Discovery – decided to prepare its own lessons⁴ directed mainly towards secondary school seniors, as a preparation for their final exam (matura exam). In order to aid the quality of the recorded lessons, some students were approached to review them. They called themselves the First Viewers.

I was able to talk to 10 (out of 19) teachers participating in the project, including its coordinators (and the main authors of the idea⁵), to 11 (out of 23) of the participating students and to one of the TV representatives, responsible for the production of the project. I obtained some of the emails exchanged between teachers and students and the documents with the remarks the students sent. I also followed the news, opinions and articles published on the Internet and watched the recorded lessons⁶ to get the idea of the level of difficulty and the challenge the teachers faced and the materials the students reviewed.

2. THE CHALLENGES – THE ATTACKS, THE RECORDINGS AND THE STUDENTS

The teachers recruited for this project were individually selected, based on their educational achievements and activities. Among them were many awarded teachers, innovative educators, activists, *youtubers* and education enthusiasts. What struck me in my conversations with them was their embrace of the challenge. Since it was something within the scope of their competences, they didn't refuse regardless of the difficulty⁷. And the project did indeed turn out to be difficult. Since this article is focused on the participation of the students I will not go into detail on the problems the teachers faced. It is however worth noting that they found themselves in a new situation, where they – being among the best teachers in Poland – were out of their depths. They were supposed to record around 25 minutes of material, carefully prepared, meticulously reviewed, with no mistakes, no slips of the tongue. They were recording at their homes and sending the material to the television station themselves. They often relied on the help of their family or at least on their cooperation as the recordings required silence and nobody could wonder around. They had never recorded anything like that before. They did not have the necessary equipment, many of them did not feel comfortable recording themselves and they feared the permanency of the recordings⁸, especially considering the negative atmosphere surrounding the project at its beginnings. The need for excellence was undisputable.

While the teachers struggled with their recording issues and the preparation of excellent material, the students in the project coordinators' school⁹ faced their own challenges. Many of them were active participant of their own education process. They had goals, ambitions and agency. And the seniors at this

² The IB final exams were cancelled, the Polish secondary school exam was postponed from May to June, but the date was communicated on the 24th of April, so for over a month many kids did not know what was going to happen.

³ The lessons started on the 30th of March 2020.

⁴ The program was called 'Korki.tv' (tutoring classes on TV) and it started airing on the 22nd of April 2020.

⁵ The idea of televising the lessons for the purposes of the technologically excluded children was devised by four people who formed the social initiative W.I.E.M. (the letters form a word that means 'I know'). <http://wiem.online>

⁶ The lessons are still available at <https://player.pl/programy-online/>

⁷ They also had high standards and demanded a lot from themselves, they worked hard to achieve something they could be proud of.

⁸ Many of them talked about the fear of being the source of meme jokes circulating the Internet.

⁹ It is a prestigious secondary school, which runs an IB program and places high not only in the national rankings but also in the IB international results.

time of the year usually knew where they would study, what their plans were and what the next steps should be. Suddenly it all seemed to have collapsed. They were *stuck* at home not knowing what the future held and the isolation started to cause some adjustment issues¹⁰. Some of the parents kept calling different teachers asking for assistance.

3. 'THE FIRST VIEWERS' PROJECT – STUDENTS AS REVIEWERS

Apart from the need for excellence and the shortages of time and manpower, there was one more aspect that needs to be mentioned here. Both of the coordinating teachers – Anna Rzepa and Anna Czernihowska-Tymoszyk, PhD – have been working with students in multiple projects for many years, engaging them in matters regarded by most of the educators as being beyond the scope of school students. The students participated in university style debates, in designing and flying stratospheric drones, arranging mock UN assemblies and many more. They were always allowed their opinions, their input and their agency. They were encouraged to speak their mind, look at things from different perspectives, they were encouraged to be reflective and aware of the role of the word - the students were practically co-creators of their education process. None of this however was formalized at school. The students were still on the other side of the classroom and on the other side of the teacher's desk. The two teachers mentioned at the beginning of this chapter always wanted to change that, letting the students join the teacher's desk¹¹. The decision to engage the students in assessing the quality of the recorded material was therefore quite straightforward.

It was a highly unusual position to put the student as a reviewer, with the right to judge the work of a teacher and communicate it back so I asked the teachers how they felt about it. All of them were very open-minded teachers, yet still some of them were quite shocked by the decision. Nevertheless they immediately realised that it was a perfect move. Some were simply surprised that they had not thought of it themselves. This shows how deeply embedded the routine structure is. Their responses underlined the fact that students were their everyday audience and they were already scrutinized by them every day with every lesson yet for some reason they had not thought of asking their feedback upfront, before the lesson was actually delivered. The reaction of the television crew was harsher: they thought it was a mistake that would not work. The reasons given were the lack of experience of the students and them being underage, which caused additional legal issues.

This uncertainty lasted few days only, as it quickly turned out that the students saved the day spotting some mistakes that no other teacher or expert reviewer noticed. And the mistakes, in spelling and pronunciation were very similar to the ones made by the teachers on the national TV, so they would have been picked up by competition, by the haters, by gossipers, etc.. It was a disaster averted. Nobody questioned the necessity of the students' input from that moment on. It struck me, that even though the research on expert teaching and learning had been pointing out that the lack of feedback was a major hindrance for teachers in achieving expertise, the idea of engaging students in providing it was so difficult to imagine. It is impossible to improve one's performance without information about its impact and quality. Since teaching is a unique profession in the sense that they rarely work with other adults, they can hardly ever obtain the necessary criticism that they could use to improve. Yet, as this project revealed, relying on student's feedback still seems to be unthinkable.

The students performing the reviews were special, outstanding and uniquely qualified for that activity. However so were the teachers. A few of the teachers I interviewed were already asking their students for feedback on a regular basis in the form of anonymous surveys and they claimed it helped them a lot since the way the pupils perceived their actions was often completely different from the teacher's expectations. Interestingly enough, these were the teachers and students in rural or small town schools, without the IB programme and other perks associated with an elite school. So the fact, that this particular project took place among some of the very best should not matter. It is the shared environment that counts. The audience of the particular performance, understanding the context and familiar with the environment. The reviews conducted by the First Viewers were unique in many ways: they were directed towards unknown teachers who did not teach them, they had to regard content, technology and subjective reception by thousands of people of different ages but also including an average student, who those students were not. In other words they had to perform professional reviews putting themselves in the shoes of other people who could potentially watch this programme. So it was a special task for special kids in special times and they

¹⁰ The schools were practically closed from the 12th of March 2020. The IB exams were cancelled, so the students had plenty of unexpected spare time on their hands and nowhere to go.

¹¹ See „A story about giving students the space at the teacher's desk” - <http://3-lab.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/wolne-biurko-3DESK.pdf>

outperformed it but that does not mean that other students could have done the same in their own environment. Nonetheless certain aspects need to be taken into account that the 'First Viewers' project revealed.

4. THE QUALITY OF THE REVIEW – WHAT MATTERED TO THE TEACHERS THE MOST

The review process for the recorded lessons was multileveled and very thorough. Teachers formed subject-based groups in which two teachers were usually recording and reviewing one another and a third was consulting and reviewing both of the recording teachers. Still, there was a lot of material, especially since some of the lessons were verified at the scenario stage and the reviews had to cover additional materials that could be included or topics that should be omitted¹². The difficulty was enhanced by the fact that every word needed to be analysed for their political correctness as the teachers were under heavy scrutiny and public pressure, already labelled LGBT lovers and ideologist indoctrinating the public. Subjects like propaganda the hate speech, the aspect of being out of wedlock and many such things were of limits.

The students were very attentive to these requirements, they listened for mistakes, inaccuracies, slips of the tongue or other blunders. They verified pronunciation, spelling, grammar, level of difficulty or interest, the accuracy within the curriculum and the topics that seemed especially interesting and could be elaborated upon. They were even able to help with the content, suggesting parts that were omitted by the teacher yet highly relevant to the topic. They also paid attention to technical aspects, like lighting or sound quality and the background of the video (since the teachers recorded at home where pets wondered freely, or other members of the family were still present, boiling water or whispering in another room or the amount of souvenirs on the window sill was distracting). Even the way the teachers spoke or looked (or possibly did not) at the camera was reflected upon and communicated back to the teachers. The teachers could not only correct whatever was necessary but – even more importantly – they could learn and improve for future purposes, they were made aware of what to pay attention to. And they appreciated this¹³. All of the teachers agreed that – thanks to this type of feedback – they were able to improve greatly with every recording.

The students divided themselves into subject groups that they chose based mostly on their interests¹⁴. Each group contained at least one student who was excelling at a particular subject (or the part of it¹⁵) and at least one who was acting as a typical audience, not particularly good at the topic but regarding the lesson as a whole and verifying its attractiveness and intelligibility. Each group had a leader who acted as a liaison between the students and the teacher, communicating the remarks and passing the comments. The comments were eventually divided into substantive (content-based), technical and subjective. The last type included the opinions that were not shared among all the students, therefore could constitute an element that might both be appreciated and disliked by different members of the public audience. The teachers loved this approach. It provided them with such a rich perspective and with diverse feedback they had not experienced before, and could use to their advantage.

Not all the comments were passed directly by the students. In some instances there was a teacher acting as an interpreter so to speak, who was collecting the remarks and passing them to the reviewed teacher. The reason behind this was twofold: some teachers had trouble with receiving the negative remarks from students and in some cases the reviewing teachers knew the reviewed ones and it was easier to pass all the remarks directly via phone, rather than to go through the process of collection, sending and reading separate comments. The time schedule was extremely tight. The students often had merely a few hours to deliver feedback, which meant watching the material, sometimes reviewing the script, looking some ambiguities up, discussing the perception among the members of the subject group, writing the comments matched to a particular second of the recording, adding general comments and sending it back to the teacher. The kids¹⁶ never missed the deadline! They sometimes had to review the recordings on the bus, on the way home or in other circumstances as not all the material was sent at the exact same time every week.

The better the recordings became, the more difficult it was to review them as the students did not want to

¹² Due to the politically charged situation.

¹³ And so did the producers. They started to circulate some of the comments among other teachers so they could learn for future purposes.

¹⁴ They filled up a spreadsheet with 4 subjects each to enable necessary matching for every required subject.

¹⁵ In history for example the students divided themselves according to the epochs where one was responsible for antiquity, one for Middle Ages and two for the modernity.

¹⁶ The teachers still called them "kids", even though most of them were already adults. It was however done with deep affection.

send blank pages or tables but wanted to show they really did their job. And they always found something, like a word used in a wrong context or a mislabelled title of a monarch or a mispronounced word. Everything mattered. As a result, the opinions on the internet were full of praise, especially as far as the substantive aspects and the correctness of the content were concerned.

What was most appreciated by the teachers and most likely enabled them to take the comments in, recognize their relevance, and actually learn from them (as oppose to becoming defensive) – was the level of communication skills; the way the remarks were communicated to them¹⁷. The language teachers marvelled about it the most, I think, underlining the cultural perfection and it being a model example of communication. The comments made the teachers feel taken care of, safe, stronger, supported and appreciated. Even the negative remarks were always substantiated and provided in such a way that made it obvious they meant no harm, only support. The comments were neutral yet showing the subjective perspective of the commentators¹⁸, thorough, extensive yet precise and well-designed. The effort was self-apparent and the perspective fresh and often illuminating. This made all the difference in the reception.

The communication skills of the students enabled the teachers to open themselves up for critique from the students. Even when it hurt, which it sometimes did - when substantial mistakes were pointed out to the best teachers, they were still able to detach it from emotions as they knew that it was done with their own benefit in mind. The way it was communicated made it clear that the mistakes were not identified to belittle the teachers and make them feel stupid but to prevent the outside ridicule or negative comments from the public. This is a very important aspect that needs to be taken into account when designing such projects in the future. The reason there is little relationship between the teachers and the students lies, among other things, in the fact that they are not regarded as equal, the students are there to learn from the teachers therefore cannot teach them at the same time. The thing is that there are multiple meanings to almost every piece of content, and those perspectives can be beneficial to both sides of the education process. Unfortunately just as the students are often closed to the opportunity of being taught¹⁹, so are the teachers. With such closed attitudes there is almost no dialogue of meanings (Klus-Stańsk, 2005) and as a result not much learning happening on either of the sides.

5. THE COMMUNITY, MUTUAL SUPPORT AND RELATIONSHIPS

One of the common themes emerging from the conversations with the teachers was the nostalgia for the contacts and the meetings that were taking place. The teachers marvelled at the depth of the relationships formed online, at the support they obtained from other teachers and the atmosphere that emerged at those meetings. They have not experienced anything like that on such a scale and in such a short term before. The common project, the outside dangers and the difficulty of the tasks put them all at the same level and consolidated their needs allowing for a fully open exchange of experiences, mutual trust and created a safe space to share difficulties. Those circumstances were not the only factors that enabled such immediate and deep relations. It was the mediation of the two coordinating teachers that made the difference. The teachers described their input, marvelling at how they anticipated different needs, seized possible apprehensions, unspoken fears, and were able not only to calm everyone down but also shield them from additional pressure from the television producers.

These conditions of lurking danger, of being ridiculed, and the need for excellence also made the decision to secure the students' feedback so much more appreciated. The coordinating teachers, and especially Anna Czernihowska-Tymoszyk, PhD protected the students from additional stress of the deadlines, taking care of all the necessary paperwork that would enable the students to obtain the well-deserved recognition²⁰. They encouraged hard work and remembered to provide positive reinforcement, as well as take care of appropriate rewards²¹.

The students however did not form any direct relationships with the teachers. They did not meet until the end of the project, when only some pleasantries were exchanged and only few of the students were in touch with

¹⁷ Some teachers raised the fact that the students were all following the IB curriculum, where communication is a very important aspect of the Learner Profile - <https://www.ibo.org/benefits/learner-profile/>.

¹⁸ Rather than pretend to be objective, hard truths.

¹⁹ See Gert Biesta postulating that the students should open themselves for being taught, not just focused on learning everything themselves.

²⁰ The names of the students were provided at the end of each lesson in the credits section, which required a lot of work, since they were not paid and some were not adults, so parental agreements needed to be obtained.

²¹ The students were promised to visit the TVN studios after the pandemic to see how the shows were made and take part in the behind-the-scenes processes.

the teachers directly, sending the feedback. The rest simply helped from behind the scenes. Still their input was greatly valued and acknowledged. The students could also see that their comments were listened to and acted upon, as the lessons were changed, errors reported by the students corrected and improvements implemented. Apart from positive feedback from the public, the program obtained some prestigious awards, which made the effort pay off for everyone.

6. STUDENTS' FEEDBACK AND THE SHAPING OF TEACHERS' EXPERTISE

Many teachers realised that their lessons had another level that they had not paid attention to before. They called it a meta-level – the perspective of the audience. It is really interesting how the enforced education system took this aspect away from reflection, disregarding the reception of the lesson as an educational aspect. Of course good and expert teachers always regard the reactions of their students but they are usually able to decipher them from the continuous interactions during the lesson. This forms the basis for improvement however it is rarely communicated directly or intentionally like in the case of this project. And this intentionality and some kind of objectiveness combined with the lack of regular interactions made teachers see their teaching from a different perspective.

A majority of the teachers stressed the struggles with the recordings and long hours of preparation²², the difficulty in performing in front of an unknown audience and the lack of interaction with it. This is in line with the research Berliner conducted (in 1988, together with Stein, Clarridge, Cushing and Pinnegar) on expert teachers, forced to teach in a laboratory setting and – as a result - requiring more time for preparation²³, complaining about not knowing the students and not being able to use their routines (since the context of regular lessons was taken away). It was clear that “their pedagogical expertise depended, in part, on knowing their students well” (Berliner, 2004, p. 202). The ability to “read” the audience forms a huge part of teachers' expertise (Wolff et al., 2015, p. 70). “For experts, learning is central, and the role of the teacher is deeply integrated into whether or not students are actively engaged so that learning can happen.” (Wolff et al., p. 81).

Research findings reviewed by Hogan, Rabinowitz and Craven (2003) suggest that there is a “significant relationship between teaching experience and the ability to accurately perceive and describe interactions and events in the classroom.” Expert teachers are also often “focused mainly on student learning and understanding of the concept(s) presented” (Hogan et al., 2003, p. 239), they have greater flexibility and adaptability than novice teachers, they also “recognize the important role of both student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions occurring during an instructional period” (Hogan et al., 2003, p. 243). The effectiveness of their communication lies, among others, in an appropriate assessment of students' prior knowledge. All of that was missing during the recordings but the feedback from the First Viewers was able to make up for a little bit of that, “returning” some of the expertise back to the experts.

Some of the teachers underlined the comparison of the recording stress to the “board-stress” students often suffer when called to answer teacher's questions²⁴ to obtain a grade. It is easy to know the answer when at the back of the classroom, just like it is easy to judge a lesson recorded, when you simply watch it from your couch. The teachers haven't had many situations that would question their teaching abilities, so this was quite new to them. They were very critical towards themselves and admitted to having spent more time than they should have due to perfectionism, emotions, stress and lack of familiarity with the camera. The feedback from the students helped them immensely. They felt more secure, less exposed and more in touch with the target audience (many of the reviewers were seniors themselves). It is difficult to say whether they would have been equally open to such feedback had the circumstances been different and the stakes not so high, but it seems certain that many of them will be more open to it from now on. Some teachers provided examples of gathering feedback from students on regular basis since the project. They realised that it was not the feedback itself that's feared but the emotional response to it, usually resulting from miscommunication causing defensiveness. These teachers were able to understand that the feedback was for their own benefit and they appreciated it from the start. I would like to direct some attention to the fact that the teachers mentioned the unpleasantness of being told about one's own mistakes, while this is the reality of almost all the students who usually obtain such a feedback from the teachers - rarely disguised in a nice form or pleasant packaging.

²² Resulting in recording the 20-something-minutes long videos for up to two-three days, including the preparations.

²³ In the described project these preparations included paying attention to the most miniscule details like rustling paper, the direction of light, the car passing by on the street and interfering with the sound of the recording, the clothes or makeup they wore, the haircut they had or the background they were on.

²⁴ In Poland there is still a tradition of calling students to the front of the classroom, by the whiteboard, and ask them a series of questions to which they need to respond and are subsequently graded for.

The teachers admitted that the feedback made them realise they might be wrong, they might not know everything and their perspective may differ greatly from the one of their students'. It was a humbling experience. Such feedback might be hard to hear but it is necessary to take it in and reflect upon it. Some teachers mentioned that this feedback should be the basis of any relationship with students. They also noticed that it helped them in the second wave of online schooling as they started to ask their students for regular feedback, making the lessons more engaging for both sides. Since the teachers also appreciated the group activity, the meetings, the support, the common goal, I wondered whether this group formation made them stronger and allowed them to take the feedback in as they all participated in the same experience. They were not alone.

7. THE IMPACT OF THE PROJECT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE STUDENTS' POSITION AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

Eventually there were 147 lessons, broadcasted from Monday to Friday in three subject-blocks, 25 minutes each, then repeated the next day and available on the separate platform for those who did not get the chance to watch in on TV. A few weeks into the project the TVN station decided to broaden the scope by adding the lessons for the 8th graders preparing for the final primary school exam. The effort seems to have paid off.

The project had an impact on both teachers and students. It shaped the attention of both sides to a different perspective, built the basis for a future dialogue and allowed for an exchange of opinions without forcing anyone to adopt the perspective of the other. The lack of direct contact, the written form, the outside threats and the sense of being on the same team – all aided that exchange. It opened the teachers to listen to students' feedback but it probably also helped the students form a different attitude towards learning, helping them become life-long learners. Being listened to, having an impact on the final shape of the lessons helped in breaking the traditional school routine, where the teacher answers all the question and there is no place for a dialogue (Klus Stańska, 2005, p. 105). These changes of awareness may aid new ways of responding to future situation and produce changes in perception for both sides (Hall, 1988, p. 74).

The project put the expert teachers at a spot where they rarely found themselves in education: they became novices. They had to learn new skills, they opened themselves to judgment from beyond the school walls. This simple change of environment suddenly forced out the artificiality of the traditional school rules, where the teacher is always right and does not make mistakes and if he or she does they are to be treated as accidental slips of tongue of no significance²⁵. During the project the teachers were aware that any mistake would be unforgivable. They were also aware that the programme would be judged by the producers through the viewing statistics. The lessons needed an additional feature despite being informative – they needed to be at least mildly interesting, which is not a feature traditional teachers regularly consider. Students' feedback was helpful in achieving those goals, so they did not put teachers into a defensive, emotional mode. And the way it was formulated additionally disposed the teachers' perception favourably towards the students, forming their 'intentionality' (Hall, 1988, p. 8).

As I described in the previous section no relationship has been formed between teachers and students. However both sides displayed an attitude of openness, intentional disposition, acceptance and respect, which are indispensable in forming any kind of real dialogue (Jankowska, 2017, p. 9). In my opinion, what has formed, in the course of this project, constitutes a prerequisite to any form of meaningful relationship, essential in any authentic dialogue of meanings – the readiness to listen, the realisation that the other side's perspective is valuable and worthy of acknowledging. The teachers exhibited trust, opening themselves up for evaluation through students' feedback, which they then reflected upon with an open mind. They sent raw materials, unedited and without the accompanying graphic materials, for judgment and appraisal. They allowed themselves a new perspective, a different approach to the position of a student – a position at which the students were allowed their opinions and their thoughts were considered valid and meaningful. The unnatural, for a traditional education, situation of the project allowed for a completely fresh estimate of who the student might be. Nobody knew how to approach all the problems that arose during the project, most project participants were out of their depths and so they formed alliances from scratch, disregarding the routines and getting off the beaten path of traditional education.

The students I talked to did not necessarily need a social partnership with a teacher. They needed space where they could communicate their thoughts to the teacher and they expected the teacher to be ready to

²⁵ Unfortunately such an approach does not work both ways therefore an equal mistake from a student is looked upon with gravity and "awarded" an appropriate grade.

talk with them. They wanted to be respected and not patronized and they wanted to not only be heard but also listened to. Being a conversation partner with the teacher does not necessarily mean forming a social relationship. As Klus-Stańska pointed it out the “social partnership is something fundamentally different from the cognitive one, which conditions the dialogue of meanings, but does not change the social hierarchy and the structure of responsibility.” (Klus-Stańska, 2005, p. 117). The cognitive partnership allows for a dialogue of meanings and requires a consent to the coexistence of different perspectives with equal value, which requires that both sides open themselves up for such a dialogue to occur.

Building relationships at school has been getting some momentum in Poland²⁶. Such relationships are said to be the basis of education, academic achievement and necessary for effective school functioning (Hall, 1988, p. 1-3). However the nature of the relationship is not clear. Should it be a social partnership, an intellectual one or maybe an emotional – close to friendship – connection. I do not think that all teachers are willing (or even should be) to form friendships with their students. I much rather prefer the dialogue of meanings and the intentional, intellectual partnership Klus-Stańska (2005) writes about²⁷. Since the school has the capacity of turning even the most enlightened ideas into “increasing the transmission efficiency and reducing resistance to symbolic school pressure.” (Klus-Stańska, 2005, p. 109), it is important to raise the issue of constructing the situations that enable changes in the basic understanding of the educational processes and educational relations.

In the described project two coordinating teachers Anna Rzepa and Anna Czernihowska-Tymoszyk acted as liaisons between the teachers and the students but also as caretakers of each of the groups separately therefore both groups trusted them and both felt safe as a result. The aspect of having a shared goal, being on the same team and being involved in a supporting community were also of importance.

The described project forced the teachers to consider their students not only as mere receivers but also as judges, critics, reviewers, editors, but most importantly – active participants, co-creators of the education process²⁸. So maybe we should start thinking about projects that would undermine the basic assumptions about the inevitable roles of education and the obvious consequences of teachers’ activities. Those would require thinking about the aspects of education that – taken for granted for such a long time – have been distorted or forgotten (like the role and position of the student, the long-term impact of education, student attitude towards educational activities and their understanding of them). This would at least open a path towards building understanding and possible trust or respect, which in turn is a prerequisite to building any sort of nurturing or intentional relationship (Dębowski, 2003, p. 70) between teachers and students without which the learning is so much more difficult to ensue. Just as a conversation may be run without dialogue, so can there be a dialogue without the actual conversation. Such a dialogue, in my opinion, occurred in this project, as both sides accepted their right to voice an opinion and opened themselves to listen to the other side’s perspective²⁹.

Dialogue enables clarification of meanings and is an important tool in helping students achieve success. Dialogue allows for voicing different perspectives and enables uncovering their meaning (Kwaśnica, 1995, p. 12-13). Exchanging information can expose us to other perspectives and values of the other side. We do not have to act on it but we can listen to it, embrace and accept its existence. Such an approach can only enrich our own perception of the surroundings and the understanding of its mechanisms, as well as broaden our own language of future communications.

The students joined the project out of curiosity and in the hope they could change something in the traditional approach. They did not work with traditional teachers yet they still managed to make a difference in their approach. We have two proverbs in Poland that concern a fish. One refers to the requirement of children to be seen not heard³⁰ and it states: “children and fish do not have a voice”³¹. The other refers to

²⁶ Natalia Boszczyk, 2019, Edukacja to relacja, czyli dlaczego nauczyciel jutra powinien postawić na relacje (Education is relation, why the teacher of tomorrow should bet on relationships. The School of Good Relationship <https://szkoladobrejrelacji.pl/edukacja-to-relacja-czyli-dlaczego-nauczyciel-jutra-powinien-postawic-na-relacje/> . She is also the author of a recently published book “Dobre relacje w szkole” (*Good relationships at school*).

²⁷ Of course in the early years, the situation is different, as the caretaking is of greater importance in those years of children development.

²⁸ And it was shocking for them to see how many issues the students paid attention to.

²⁹ The teachers did not have to accept all the remarks just as the students were accepting the point of view of the teachers presented in the recordings. They exchanged perspectives, pointed out difference, respectfully and with understanding, exhibiting readiness and ability for mutual understanding (Kwaśnica, 1995, p. 14).

³⁰ Children should be seen not heard.

being in one's element and it states: "to feel like a fish in the water". In this project it seems that since the teachers did not feel like a fish in the water, the students – unlike the fish – gained their voice.

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³¹ Some of the students participating in the described project also authored an educational alert entitled The student is not a fish (Uczeń nie ryba), where they raised their voice on the current state of education and suggested some changes. See <http://3-lab.pl/alert-edukacyjny/>