

SCHOOL AS AN INSTITUTION COOPERATING WITH THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

This paper forms a short study on the broad subject of the cooperation between educational institutions and the local environment and the involvement of the local environment in the school, cultural and scientific life. The article highlights only one aspect of the wide spectrum of issues related to this subject. It presents the school and its cooperation with the local environment. The paper is divided into two parts. The first, theoretical, part expounds and explains the key terms, such as volunteering, charity, leisure time or local environment. The second part contains the analysis of own research which involved teachers from two primary schools in the Małopolskie Province and secondary school students also from the Małopolskie Province. The teachers commented on the links between the local life and the school, whereas the students presented their point of view on the same matter after several years of education.

Keywords:

volunteering, school, charity, leisure time, local environment, cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The objective of focusing on the issues related to the cooperation between the school and the local community was to further the pedagogical knowledge and make practical use of the gained experience. The school is an institution that actively participates in the life of its environment, influences the social life of respective groups and integrates the institutions operating within the same area by undertaking a variety of initiatives. The cooperation between the school and the local environment represents an issue from the sphere of theories of upbringing, general didactics and social pedagogy. The

school performs a significant role in shaping the adolescent's personality, upbringing and education. It is an integral part of the process of human development, taking account of the family environment. The consistency of activities aiming at the student's psychic and physical development is inextricably connected with the cooperation between the school and the local environment.

1. EXPLANATION OF TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO THE DISCUSSED ISSUES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The term "local environment" belongs to the core terminology of contemporary sociology. However, for a few dozen years it has been widely used in the language of social pedagogy, which can be attributed to sociologists themselves as they have joined the family of social pedagogues, because of the similar subject matter of these two disciplines. At the level of its meaning this term has been expanded by adding the aspect of upbringing, which is sometimes expressed semantically as the "local upbringing environment". This term has a relatively large family of synonyms, such as local community, local populace, neighbourhood environment, housing estate, native environment, territorial environment and local life space and activity space. All these terms have a similar semantic content [11]. When the definition of "local environment" is presented, it is necessary to take into account the various typologies of environments introduced by psychologists, sociologists, pedagogues and researchers investigating the environment. The paper will highlight only some of them. In the dictionary of psychology the environment is defined as the life space (...), the sphere where the exchange of information and emotions between individuals takes place. The environment continuously affects human beings from conception to death. (...) A human being becomes the particular individuality only under the influence of the environment in which one lives and depending on the effects of interactions with others, since the human personality is developed through relations with other people (...) [10]. Tadeusz Pilch, presenting the pedagogical point of view, stated that "the local environment, apart from representing a social population inhabiting a small, relatively confined area, signifies also the whole system of institutions designed to organise the collective life, such as church, school, service institutions, social or entertainment facilities, as well as mechanisms governing individual behaviours and interpersonal relations, i.e. customs, moral standards, authorities and behavioural patterns" [8]. In reference with the above designation a family is the first and most solid social world for an infant and a child. It provides the basis for the first and most durable social bonds. The family (...) is the main arena for gaining experience [3]. The organisational structure of the environment comprises both internal and external components as well as their interrelationships. The respective components of the environment can be arranged into hierarchies based on different criteria. The environmental criterion is most often encountered in pedagogical literature. At the place of residence there are numerous social groups, institutions and centres undertaking activities in the sphere of upbringing, care and social work. Children's activity takes place, in part, in these groups, which is of considerable importance for stimulating their development.



The comprehensive approach to the above issues inclines to specify the definition of the term “cooperation”, which is often interchanged with “collaboration”. According to Albert Wojciech Maszke, it is (...) a social relation between individuals or social groups reciprocally reinforcing their activities that aim at the fulfilment of a common objective [6]. The cooperation between public authorities and non-profit sectors contributes to a better satisfaction of social needs, whereas novel benefits aim at the rationalization of state budget expenditure. Tasks performed to improve the situation of selected social groups are the symptom of concerted activities undertaken by the self-government and non-state agencies. Particular attention should be paid to “the collaboration between the school and the local environment in the area of upbringing (...), intended to enhance the efficiency of achieving objectives in moral, social and aesthetic upbringing. Social and moral upbringing comprises, among others, the development of a hierarchy of values and moral attitudes, socialisation and inducing moral sensitivity. Aesthetic upbringing consists in developing creative attitudes and sensitivity to beauty and introducing a child to the world of culture. Upbringing conducive to health includes promoting a healthy lifestyle, ensuring a harmonious psychomotor development and enabling children to acquire the ability to identify threats to life and mental and physical health” [9].

In recent months there has been a lot of discussion about primary schools, mainly because of a new regulation, pursuant to which children start compulsory school at the age of six. Discussions have focused mainly on technical issues related to a school building, i.e. whether its rooms are appropriately adjusted, and on substantive issues, i.e. the selection of the appropriate system for learning through play. However, the school is not only a building where children stay within fixed hours. It is mainly the pupils’ environment which presents the set and implemented objectives, values and standards.

The school, being an institution involved in upbringing, presenting different behaviours and social standards, explaining the difference between right and wrong and introducing a child to social life, is the place where the pupils’ socialisation takes place on a large scale. Socialisation, in accordance with the definition provided by Aleksander Nalaskowski, should be understood as “the acquisition by an individual of a system of values, standards and behavioural patterns prevailing in a given population. Socialisation takes place throughout the individual’s life, but its climax occurs when a child becomes a social being” [7]. A child starts to function in the society while being at nursery school or primary school at the latest. Therefore, all educational institutions play such an important role, because children attending them start to function independently, without any parental support, in the society. Not all children go to nursery schools first. It is during the schooling period when a child becomes a social being.

Curricula adopted in every school impose the introduction of the above standards into the school life in different ways. Teachers are obliged to conduct various classes that introduce pupils to and induce them to learn about social issues and problems. The best way to bring such issues closer to pupils is to educate them through activity. Hence, such classes are often accompanied by various actions in which pupils are in-

volved. It can be observed that at the start of primary school the classes that aim at developing in children a compassionate approach to social problems are accompanied, for example, by actions of collecting food for animal shelters. It provides the starting point for broad discussions on the social problem of abandoning unwanted pets or the lack of responsibility for other creatures and on the sense of helping the vulnerable.

Actions taken for animal shelters are just one of the examples. Schools often become involved in the local life not only through charitable actions, but also by providing support to families in need or by making their premises available for cultural events.

Any social action is undertaken by particular people, namely action leaders and coordinators, and such roles are often assumed by teachers, who supervise pupils' activities and stimulate and motivate them to act. Sometimes also parents join various projects. All of the above can be collectively called volunteers.

Katarzyna Braun wrote that "Volunteering can therefore be defined as a social movement that comprises actions taken by organisations, social groups and also by individuals, intended to provide assistance to people who, due to various causes, have found themselves in difficult life circumstances" [2].

In *Miłość najwspanialszą formą ewangelizacji* Pope John Paul II said that "Volunteering should be the school of life, particularly for young people, contributing to their upbringing in the culture of solidarity and openness and in the readiness for offering the gift of self" [4].

Thence, teachers so often involve pupils in various actions for the benefit of others, to make the school an institution engaging in the local community's life. It is one of the better methods of implementing the said standards and rules. Theorising will not bring about any effects in this case. Making children, and then adolescents, aware of the problems occurring in their environment is possible only when a young person becomes acquainted with the problem and gets a feeling for it, obviously as appropriate to their age.

Agnieszka Bejma draws attention to work done by volunteers, who at present have a wide range of possibilities to choose from.

"Activities undertaken by volunteers concentrate predominantly on the other person, but also on this person's environment and surroundings. The list of tasks performed by volunteers is not limited and, particularly nowadays, in the face of advancing technological development, it provides numerous opportunities to act" [1].

To act effectively for the benefit of others tutors should make use of modern technologies and reach pupils, for example, by organising events via social media. Owing to the above such actions will be of considerable interest and teachers will have an opportunity to stimulate pupils to be more active. In order to involve children or young people it is necessary to make them interested.

The school's activity, apart from teaching, includes not only assistance provided to others – volunteering involves also going out into the environment. It is done by organising the school's open days, during which pupils and parents become familiar with the



school as an institution and with its teachers. Thematic outdoor events, for example sports events, are also organised, aiming at integrating families. The school often rents or makes available its rooms to organise meetings in the afternoon or soirées of poetry or carol-singing.

The school is not an empty institution. It is represented by teachers, pupils and parents. If they act for the benefit of others and organise happenings encouraging people to act together, the school can then be described as an institution involved in the local community's life.

When young people have a lot of leisure time it translates directly into their involvement in various forms of time-spending activities. Volunteering, which is the help given to others or to the environment, non-compulsory and non-commercial, is currently spreading out, as observed by Ewa Martynowicz-Hetka. "It is not about the fulfilment of professional tasks free of charge or serving apprenticeship while awaiting formal employment, but rather about the performance of tasks for the benefit of others, coming from the goodness of one's heart and driven by reason" [5]. The importance of volunteering has been noticed even by politicians, as it has become the subject of interest for social policy. They, justly, perceive volunteering as a key to improve the life of local environments. Volunteering is capable of reaching beneath the surface, as people who themselves experienced problems can often be found among volunteers.

2. ANALYSIS OF OWN RESEARCH

This part of the article presents the analysis of own research which included a group of teachers from primary schools in Małopolska and a dozen or so secondary school students.

A research problem has been included in the following question: Are schools involved in the local community's life? Teachers were asked to answer the questions listed in the questionnaire developed by the author of this paper. Students participated in discussions held on specific topics.

The research on the way in which the school collaborates with the local environment and on the school's initiative evidencing its involvement in the local community's life was started by asking teachers the following question:

Do you think the school that you work for is involved in the local community's life? All teachers' replies were affirmative, which encouraged a positive attitude to the analysis of the selected topic. It proves that institutions such as schools are not indifferent to what is going on in their neighbourhood. They are not aloof institutions and they adopt a forthcoming approach to the needs of the local environment.

As presented in Figure 1 the school becomes involved in this type of activity predominantly by organising open days and outdoor community events. These are the most popular ways.

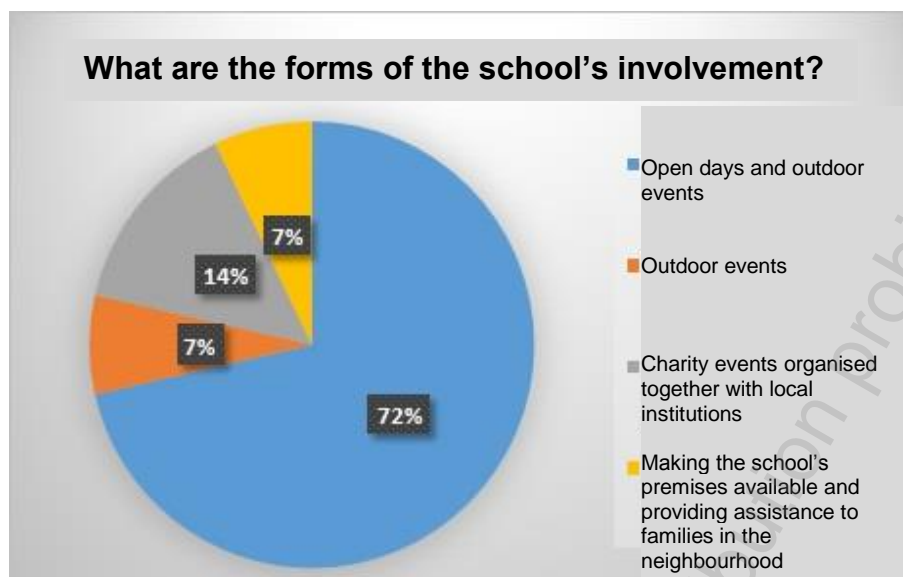


Fig. 1. Forms of the school's involvement in the local community's life

Source: Own study

Other methods listed by the respondent group include charity events that consist in fundraising or collecting other necessary things, depending on the needs, and also making the school premises available and providing assistance to families in the neighbourhood.

As the teachers' responses show the organisation of various actions at the school is initiated in a majority of cases by the school head or teachers.

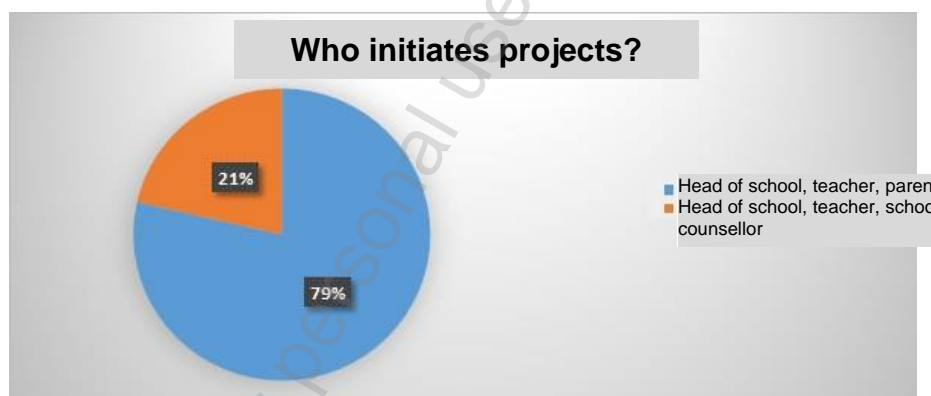


Fig. 2. Initiator of the school's involvement in social actions

Source: Own study

Actions initiated by parents also take place in the premises of the schools included in the research.

The school's involvement in the local community's needs is most often regular; these are various seasonal actions as well as outdoor events and open days. However, spontaneous and one-off events, without continuation in the following years, are also held. From among the listed forms of involvement one activity stands out, namely assistance

provided to families in need. Such actions are undertaken on an ad-hoc basis. This activity can be in the form of a regular contact with a family which is provided with different types of aid or a non-recurrent action taken, for example, in the case of a child's illness or after a flood or fire.

When asked about benefits derived from the cooperation with the local environment the teachers mainly pointed out a higher number of applications for admission. Other benefits included changes in the understanding of a teacher's work and possibilities of becoming familiar with the way the school operates. Furthermore, such cooperation was regarded as the promotion of the school (which is directly related to the above-mentioned increased number of applications for admissions). The teachers observed also the link between the school's involvement and the pupils' compassion to people in a difficult situation. An important aspect that appeared in the teachers' replies is the integration of the local environment. The school acts as an institution that brings local residents together for the sake of a common action or to have fun at an outdoor event.

To determine whether the discussed involvement results from the implementation of the School's Work Plan the following question was included in the questionnaire: What are the motives behind the activity, e.g. charity, undertaken by the school?

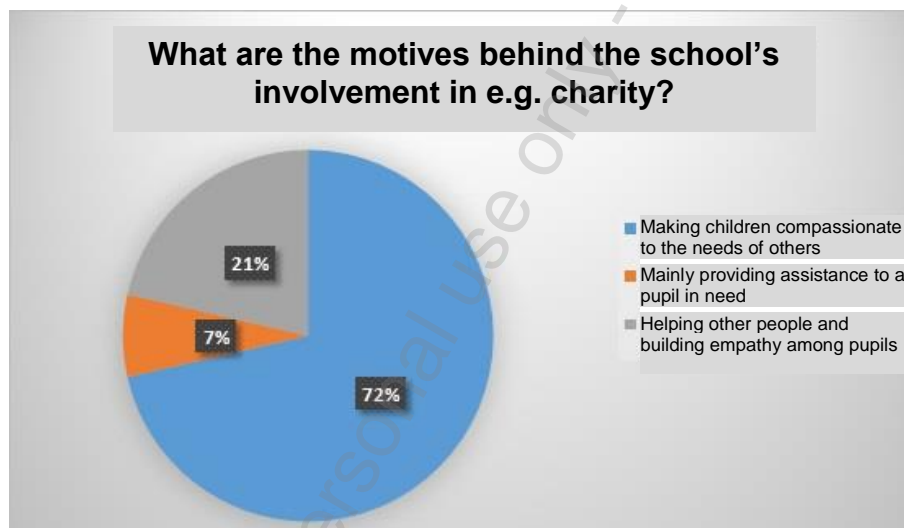


Fig. 3. Motives behind the school's involvement in a charitable activity

Source: Own study

On the basis of the obtained responses it can be observed that the school's involvement in, for example, a charitable activity is caused mainly by the desire to make pupils compassionate to the needs of others, to help others and to build empathy among pupils. At present, callousness among young people and children is often discussed and, as evidenced by research, teachers are aware of the core of this problem. The school as an educating institution imbues pupils with such important values as empathy or awareness of the needs of others.

According to the teachers' comments, pupils are willing to join such actions and there is no need to persuade them to do it. They participate eagerly in the organisation of outdoor events. They also supervise all seasonal events where profits are allocated to charity purposes. Such extensive involvement and participation in the said undertakings result from the upbringing of the children and the school tradition. From the start of primary school groups of pupils become involved in various projects, owing to which they have a natural need to help others.

Whenever an action is organised its purpose is always clearly stated and, what is more, pupils may often decide themselves about the objective of their project.

The teachers taking part in the research listed the following purposes of the organised actions: fundraising for a children's hospice, Santa Claus gifts for the needy pupils at the school and the acquisition of necessary educational aids for children given inclusive education (being in the so-called integration forms). As a measurable effect the respondents specified also the pupils' willingness and strong involvement in a future charitable activity.

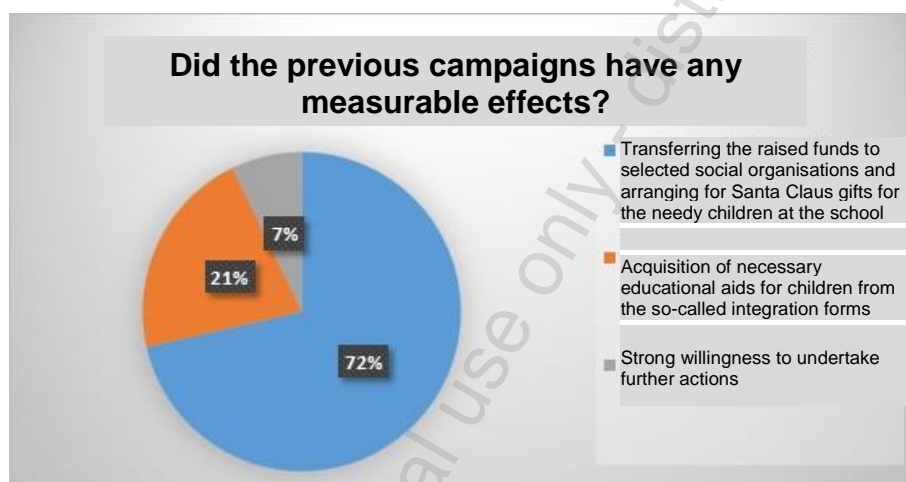


Fig. 4. Effects of organised campaigns

Source: Own study

The teachers openly mentioned another, equally important, aspect of any actions undertaken in the local community, i.e. enhancing the school's image or maintaining its good reputation. With regard to the above, the school's activity comprises the organisation of the action, its evaluation, drawing conclusions regarding its efficiency and discussing the set objectives.

In addition, the teachers observed a direct relationship: the bigger the school's involvement and openness, the higher the number of applications for admission and the better opinion enjoyed by the school in the neighbourhood. There is also a noticeable increase in the number of applications for admission submitted from outside the school's region.



Fig. 5. Profits derived by the school involved in the local activity

Source: Own study

The teachers noticed that any actions organised around a specific issue had an impact on the pupils' attitudes to such an issue, e.g. poverty or disease.

All teachers hoped and strongly believed that their efforts put into familiarising and involving children in different actions would be rewarded in the future by their equally active, and independent at that time, involvement.

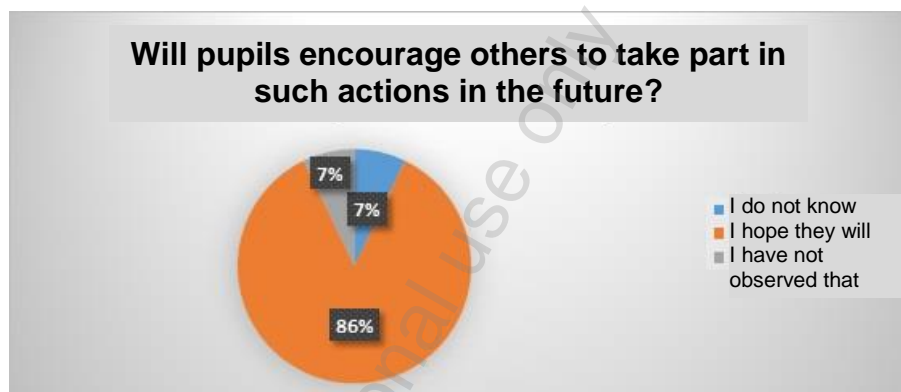


Fig. 6. Pupils' involvement in charitable actions in the future

Source: Own study

During the organisation of any actions the leader teacher can rely on a considerable support provided by other teachers. Furthermore, the representatives of the Parent Council as well as other parents are always willing to help, by providing financial support to buy prizes for lotteries or by making purchases at school fairs. Sometimes parents ask the school to participate in some actions, e.g. the collection of plastic caps to provide funds to buy a wheelchair for a neighbour.

In order to organise a lottery or a fair it is necessary not only to obtain financial support from parents, but also to find benefactors.

The school finds benefactors for a specific action primarily through direct contacts of the school's head or teachers with prospective sponsors. Informational posters and the assistance provided by the Parent Council also bring about desirable effects.

In the majority of schools there are no parents' associations gathering people who act for the benefit of the local community. However, the teachers from one of the schools taking part in the research mentioned parents from a primary school in Wieliczka who established an association "Moje Krzyszkowice", supporting families under their care. Furthermore, the association integrates the neighbouring housing estates by organising, for example, carol-singing or outdoor events for families.

To make the study of the issue more thorough the questionnaire completed by the teachers was supplemented with more informal discussions with secondary school students about the schools' involvement in social activity.

The first question was as follows: Did the school exert any influence on you in respect of instilling empathy and the need to involve in charity and to be a volunteer?

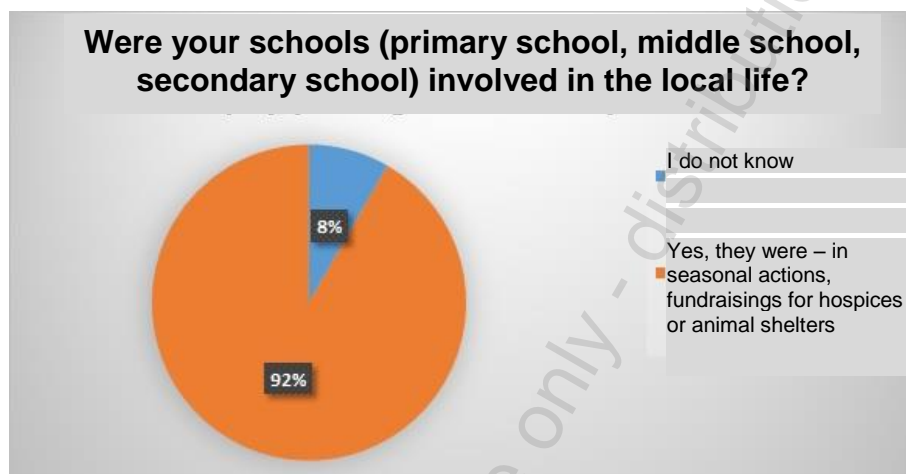


Fig. 7. School's involvement in the local community's life

Source: Own study

The involvement of the schools attended by the interviewed students is presented in Figure 7, which shows that the vast majority of them took part in charitable actions such as fundraisings for children's hospices or animal shelters. The students remembered also seasonal fairs organised by primary schools, where the earned profits would always be allocated to a charitable cause.

The young people mentioned also their parents' involvement in helping others, however their parents would not invite the school to join them. The parents motivated their children, but they did not act on a large scale.

The interviewed students were the second year students of the secondary school. When they commented on their charitable activity they were aware it was rather limited, which they justified with the lack of time. However, they take part in Szlachetna Paczka (Christmas gifts action). Although it is an obligatory initiative, they remember about it and remind their teachers of it. They are eager to choose their leader and take action.

Several students, mainly girls, reported that the school encouraged them to become a volunteer at a hospice. These students were interested in becoming a volunteer and

were trying to reconcile learning and doing volunteer work, but failed to do so. They had to give up volunteer work.

Another question asked during the interview was the following: Did the school force you to be involved in the local or charitable activity? Several students, admitting that the initiative was taken by the school, corrected the question by stating that the school did not force to do anything but motivated to do it. They are eager to participate in activities proposed by the school and do not feel compelled to do it. However, the supervision exercised by the school with regard to the regularity and efficiency of actions is convenient for students, since, as they say, they are not able to act on their own without the school, because they become lost in the multitude of their duties. They embark on some undertaking, but they do not finalise it or their effects are poor. With a teacher acting as a coordinator it proceeds much easier.

From among actions in which they participated they best remembered taking part in the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity. They said it was a volunteer activity, however their chief motivation, as they said, was the fact of receiving additional points for their conduct. One would wonder whether Jerzy Owsiak, the organiser of the 24th action this year, would be satisfied with this kind of motivation to be a volunteer and whether the principle that irrespective of the source of motivation it is the help that counts is positive. They actually helped, but did they learn anything from it? This issue could be a subject of further considerations regarding young people's volunteering.

Other actions included performances in hospices or taking part in Kartka Świąteczna (Christmas card action) as well as the previously mentioned seasonal fairs.

In the further part of the interview the students were asked who instilled in them the willingness to help others, their parents or the school. Some of the students had a problem with answering this question, however they did not say that it was definitely the school. The majority of students, without hesitation, pointed to their parents. They did not think that the school had built the need for such activity in them or taught about its sense. The students emphasised that they had never learnt what happened to the things collected for animals at a later stage. They knew the things were delivered to the shelter, but there was no letter of intent.

This remark made by the students is important and in the future both parties should be informed of the outcome of any action. It is a major observation for the coordinating teacher that any action should be monitored to the end.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the considerations presented herein leads to the conclusion that although the school's involvement in the local life is strong, as declared by the teachers, the students do not observe or feel the same degree of involvement. A question arises whether they do not notice the above, because it is a niche phenomenon in Polish schools or because they simply do not pay attention to it. It may be the case that there are many actions taking place which are underestimated by students or they are not aware of their participation in such actions. If it happens to be so, more focus should be given to informing students not only about the action itself, but also about

its objectives, organisers, etc. It would also be worthwhile for teachers to become open to the pupil's world and, while cooperating as coordinators with the local environment, to remember about mass media, perhaps the local radio station or newspaper, but also the Internet and social media through which they can reach young people as well as their parents.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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