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Kindness as an important element of social emotional education at school: translation and initial validation of the Polish version of the *School Kindness Scale* – a preliminary study

Życzliwość, jako istotny element edukacji społeczno-emocjonalnej na terenie szkoły: tłumaczenie i walidacja polskiej wersji szkolnej skali życzliwości (School Kindness Scale) – badania wstępne

Abstract

Introduction. The article highlights the need to shape students' socio-emotional skills and recognizes kindness as the foundation necessary to build these competencies. A questionnaire may be used to recognize the involvement of the school community in the formation of benevolent attitudes and produce the *School Kindness Scale* (Binfet, Gadermann, & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

Aim. The main aim of the article is to present the results of preliminary research for the Polish adaptation and validation of the *School Kindness Scale* questionnaire.

Methods. The study was conducted in May 2021 on a sample of students (N=166 individuals, aged 14 to 21 years (mean age was M=17.260, SD=2.06) in the final grades of elementary and secondary schools. It was part of a larger research project carried out by the

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Introduction

The definition of kindness

Referring to the dictionary definition, the concept of kindness can be understood as benevolence and friendliness (Sobol, 2005). The phrase dictionary indicates that it is an unselfish, undying, true, cordial, sincere, mutual, and friendly attitude (Skorupka, 2002). On the other hand, the thesaurus gives as synonyms of kind such adjectives as “friendly, helpful, kindly disposed to someone, favourable, gracious, nice, positive, courteous, polite, cordial, warm” (Cienkowski, 1993, p. 363). Many of the interpretations point out as an essential defining element – a friendly disposition, a characteristic of someone who likes other people, wants the best for them and is ready to act in order to do good things for them (*Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego*, n. d.).

Aristotle, when approaching the issue of intellectual and ethical virtues, considered the term kindness in the category of wishing someone well and acting in a disinterested manner, both towards acquaintances and strangers (Barański, 2019). Similarly, Cicero placed great emphasis on the unselfishness of the kindness shown, but pointed out that this attitude should give rise to gratitude and reciprocity (in: Rykaczewski, 1879). In Christian thought, kindness appears in connection with mercy and is treated as a universal virtue (Barański, 2019). Kindness is also seen as one of the social virtues that is expressed in attitude, actions, and words, towards another human being or human community. A kind person alleviates suffering and contributes to the happiness of others. They inspire admiration not so much because of the deed, but because of their friendly attitude. They are able to rejoice in the happiness of others, and are alien to the satisfaction of someone else’s failure (Misiuna, 1995).

These selected definitional attempts indicated above show us the essential character of the concept in question. In humanities and social sciences, kindness is most often defined in two ways. Some authors define it as a character or personality trait, or a kind of attitude, which leads to a certain behaviour towards others (and according to some – also towards oneself). Others see it as a type of prosocial action, motivated by empathy and the ability to take the other person’s perspective (Layous et al., 2012; Layous et al., 2017; Nelson-Coffey et al., 2017).

In this paper, we will describe kindness as a form of pro-social attitude that can be manifested in selfless behaviour for the benefit of others, usually involving social exchanges closely related to everyday life and small expressions of care and goodwill, similarly as the authors of the *School Kindness Scale* (Binfet, Gadermann, & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

- self-regulation – impulse control, stress management, perseverance, goal setting, motivation;
- social awareness – empathy, respect for others, and ability to change perspective
- ability to establish and maintain relationships – cooperation, seeking and giving help, communication;
- responsible decision making – evaluation and reflection, personal and ethical responsibility.

Instruction in SEL should be implemented in the context of care, safety, good stewardship, and participation in the classroom, school, and other contexts, and the skills developed should be reinforced by the school, home, and community. As with typical school learning, students acquire knowledge and skills by engaging in activities inside and outside the classroom (Elias et al., 2000).

All children are potential beneficiaries here, including those already at risk, those beginning to exhibit unacceptable behaviours, and those already exhibiting problem behaviours (Elias et al., 2000). Most SEL programs, however, are used as forms of general health promotion and prevention, aimed at preventing behavioural problems by teaching social and emotional competence. SEL is a support system – a concept that organizes, coordinates, and integrates school-based promotion and prevention programs. The most effective forms of implementation involve students, teachers, parents, and community members as partners in the planning, application, and evaluation of SEL. Systematic social and emotional education should begin in kindergarten and continue through secondary school, and consequently should also be linked to higher education constituting an integral part of the school life as well as functioning outside of it (Elias et al., 2000).

Why use SEL programs? As research indicates, they have positive effects on the development of positive attitudes toward self and others, increase the level and range of pro-social behaviours, decrease the incidence of problem behaviour and emotional distress, and improve academic performance. SEL programs significantly and positively affect the level of functioning in socio-emotional variables, such as emotion recognition, stress management, empathy, problem solving, and decision-making skills (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). Additionally, students who are more self-aware and confident in their own abilities try harder and are more persistent in the face of difficulties and challenges. Individuals who set ambitious performance goals are also more disciplined, self-motivated, better equipped to cope with stress, and organize their approach to studying so that they can learn more and obtain higher grades (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachanet, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). Also, students who use problem-solving skills to overcome difficulties and make responsible decisions about learning and homework have better outcomes. Research on

Park, 2019; Panaghi et al., 2010; Yurdabakan & Uz Baş, 2019) point to the increasing dissemination of the Scale, making it a valuable tool not only for local research but also for cross-cultural comparisons.

Procedure of data collection for the Polish version of the *School Kindness Scale* was carried out as part of a broad survey of school students conducted by the City of Poznań Department of Education in Poznań schools. The study was conducted for the purposes of the project "The strategy of educational development of the city of Poznań 2030".

The study was carried out in two rounds, in February and in May 2021. It covered the last years of primary and secondary school students, excluding special schools. The research questionnaire and the Research Report were prepared by the Research Team of the Faculty of Educational Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (*Report from surveys of male and female students of Poznań schools within the project*, 2021).

The first round of the study involved 1,043 male and female students, 996 of whom completed valid questionnaires for the analysis. The second round of the study, which aimed to deepen, supplement, or verify the selected themes analysed in the first round of the study, involved 172 participants, mainly from secondary schools, of whom 166 completed valid questionnaires. At this stage of the study, the Polish adaptation of the *School Kindness Scale* questionnaire was used.

Throughout the study, a diagnostic survey was used, carried out by means of a CAWI questionnaire posted on the Internet. The questionnaire used in the study was prepared in two versions: a short version for male and female students of the eighth grade of elementary school and an extended version for male and female students of the second and fourth grades of secondary schools.

The survey was conducted by the Department of Education in cooperation with school principals. The survey was addressed to eighth-grade students and final-year students of secondary schools. It was anonymous and voluntary. The information about the survey and the request to disseminate it among the student community was sent via the internal messenger to all primary and secondary schools administered by the City of Poznań. After getting acquainted with the message, school principals decided whether to join the project.

For students with disabilities, a consent from the parent/legal guardian was required as a condition for participation in the study, which was accomplished through an e-register. Along with a description of the study objectives and the consent form, parents were also given a research survey form for review. Once the parent/guardian gave their consent, a link to the online survey for the student to complete was sent in the feedback.

Due to the fact that at the time of the second round of the study, the Polish version of the *School Kindness Scale* had not yet been validated, the results were used to

Table 3
Father's/guardian's education level – descriptive statistics.

		Frequency	Percent
Father's/ guardian's education	Bachelor or higher	29	17.5
	I don't know	32	19.3
	Primary school	12	7.2
	Secondary school	37	22.3
	Degree/Title	13	7.8
	Vocational school	43	25.9
	Total	166	100.0

Source: own research.

The distribution of education levels for mothers/caregivers indicated that they were more highly educated than male caregivers. Slightly more than 1/3 of them had secondary education (31.9%) and 27.1% had a Bachelor's degree or higher. Only 0.6% had completed their education at the elementary school level (Table 4).

Table 4
Mother's/guardian education – descriptive statistics.

		Frequency	Percent
Mother's/ guardian's education	Bachelor or higher	45	27.1
	I don't know	23	13.9
	Primary school	1	0.6
	Secondary school	53	31.9
	Degree/Title	15	9.0
	Vocational school	29	17.5
	Total	166	100.0

Source: own research.

Students participating in the study mostly resided in urban areas (51.2% in Poznań, and 23.5% in Wielkopolska, in cities other than Poznań; see Table 5).

Table 5
Place of residence – descriptive statistics.

		Frequency	Percent
Place of residence	A city other than Poznań	39	23.5
	Poznań	85	51.2
	Countryside	42	25.3
	Total	166	100.0

Source: own research.

- *Życzliwość często zdarza się w mojej klasie* [Kindness happens regularly in my classroom];
- *Życzliwość często zdarza się w mojej szkole* [Kindness happens regularly in my school];
- *Mój wychowawca/ moja wychowawczyni jest życzliwy/a* [My class teacher is kind];
- *W mojej szkole zachęca się mnie, żebym był/a życzliwy/a* [At my school, I am encouraged to be kind].

Results

Analysis of the survey responses

The analysis of responses to each test item indicates that there is a small percentage of students strongly indicating a lack of kindness in their school, classroom, or from their teachers. Only 3.6% of students reported that adults in their school do not model kindness, and 3% strongly disagreed with the statement that their class teacher is a kind person. For responses to all statements, the rate indicating: “hard to say” was relatively high, and in all but one item, it was about 30% (the exception was “My class teacher is kind”, here only 10.8% of students had no opinion).

The percentage of “Definitely yes” responses is also relatively low for most statements. Only 9% of students declared that adults in their school model kindness, and only 4.2% believed that the statement that kindness happens regularly in their school is definitely true. Although the quoted statistics paint a rather disturbing picture of the emotional climate at school, it is important to note that in the case of the relationship with the class teacher, a significant percentage of students evaluated it positively (as many as 51.2% of students responded “Definitely yes” to the statement “My class teacher is kind”, and another 31.3% believed that this statement is rather true). Also overall, more than half of the students (57.8%) said that they are encouraged to be kind in their school. The distribution of responses to each item of the scale is shown in Tables 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Table 8

Distribution of the responses to item 1.

		Frequency	Percent
Adults in my school model kindness.	definitely yes	15	9.0
	rather yes	69	41.6
	hard to say	47	28.3
	rather not	29	17.5
	definitely not	6	3.6
	Total	166	100.0

Source: own research.

Reliability analysis

In testing the reliability of the *School Kindness Scale*, the mean scores obtained for each item were checked and Cronbach's Alpha analysis was conducted. A scree plot for the scale was also drawn up.

The mean for the Scale was $M=18.00$ ($SD=3.734$; Table 13).

Table 13

Descriptive statistics for the School Kindness Scale.

Scale statistics	Mean	Variance	Standard deviation	Number of items
	18.00	13.939	3.734	5

Source: own research.

The highest mean scores were obtained for statement four, i.e., "My class teacher is kind" ($M=4.24$; $SD=0.992$), the lowest for the statement: "Kindness happens regularly in my school" ($M=3.34$; $SD=0.899$). Details are shown in Table 14.

Table 14

Statistics of the test items on the School Kindness Scale.

Statistics of the test items	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Adults in my school model kindness.	3.35	0.990	166
Kindness happens regularly in my class.	3.44	1.070	166
Kindness happens regularly in my school.	3.34	0.899	166
My class teacher is kind.	4.24	0.992	166
In my school, I am encouraged to be kind.	3.63	1.092	166

Source: own research.

The coefficient value was Cronbach's alpha $\alpha=0.792$, which should be considered as a result indicating satisfactory reliability of the *School Kindness Scale* (Table 15).

Table 15

Cronbach's alpha statistic for the School Kindness Scale.

Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items	Number of items
0.792	0.795	5

Source: own research.

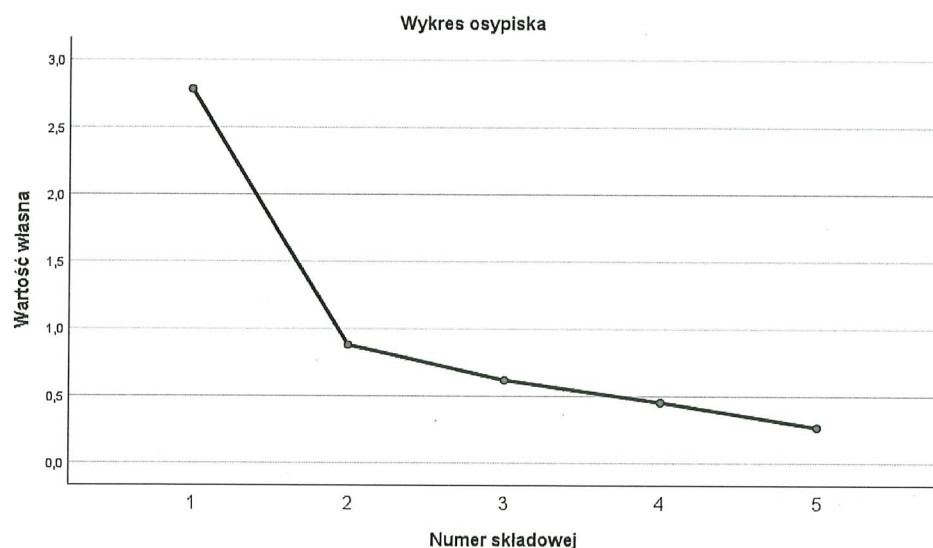


Figure 1. Scree plot for the *School Kindness Scale*

Source: own research.

Table 18

The matrix of components of the School Kindness Scale.

Matrix of components	Component 1
Adults in my school model kindness.	0.840
Kindness happens regularly in my class.	0.652
Kindness happens regularly in my school.	0.819
My class teacher is kind.	0.609
In my school, I am encouraged to be kind.	0.781

Source: own research.

Discussion

The Polish version of the *School Kindness Scale* in a preliminary study obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficient value of $\alpha=0.792$, which should be considered as a result indicating satisfactory reliability.

The average score in the Scale for the entire surveyed sample was $M=18$ ($SD=3.734$) out of 25. Particularly interesting is the result of the frequency analysis of answers to particular test statements, indicating that more than half of the students strongly agree that their class teacher is a kind person, and if we add those who an-

cated their friendliness, which constitutes 82.5% of all responses. The results in terms of attitude formation were also extremely promising, as many as 96 (57.8%) male and female students declared that being kind is encouraged in their schools. Basically, it may be assumed that as regards the diagnosed variables, in the respondents' schools, the climate and atmosphere shared by the whole school community is favourable and conducive to the development of mutual kindness.

However, it should be remembered that there is a group of study subjects who evaluated the school environment in a critical way. As regards statement one, it was 35 respondents (21.1%), as regards statement two, 30 respondents (18%), as regards statement three, 29 respondents (17.5%), as regards statement four, 11 respondents (6.6%), and as regards statement five, 22 respondents (13.2%).

At the same time, it should be noted that some students find it difficult to evaluate the phenomenon of friendliness in their own school, choosing the option "hard to say", indicating neither positive nor negative attitudes. "Sticking to the middle of the scale" can be interpreted in many ways. On the one hand, it may be the result of a lack of motivation to fill out the questionnaire, but it may also stem from an inability to interpret phenomena, make judgments and decisions, or it could be a manifestation of ignorance of key emotional and social competencies, the foundation of which is constituted by kindness, concern, and sensitivity to others.

The revealed positive image of school as a space that models and fosters kind, pro-social attitudes allows us to look into the future with optimism. At the same time, the revealed deficits direct us at paying more attention to the necessity of more systematic and conscious shaping of social and emotional competences of both teachers and students. The above-mentioned SEL programs can serve the acquisition of these abilities. They are based on a process through which children and adults develop the attitudes and skills necessary to understand other people, deal with emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make accurate and responsible decisions. In addition to the effects of better, more frequent, and deeper social relationships, these programs serve to increase self-awareness and control, and research shows that greater resources in the area of social and emotional competence translate into better educational outcomes.

Tools such as the *School Kindness Scale*, i.e., simple, understandable, and short, make it possible to quickly obtain information about the emotional climate in the school and to assess the effectiveness of the process of shaping pro-social attitudes.

The scale has been translated into a number of languages and features in scientific publications from various research centres around the world, which makes it a valuable tool not only for local research but also for cross-cultural comparisons.

The limitation of the presented study is the relatively small sample size. A methodologically correct assessment of accuracy by age group and taking into account oth-

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