



# Teachers' outlooks and assistance strategies with regard to “shy” pupils



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The teachers are not sufficiently aware of the shy pupils' internal experience.
- A variety of assistance strategies is used by teachers.
- The strategies are demonstrated and discussed.
- The strategies are organized according to focuses and planes of intervention.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 12 September 2015

Received in revised form

30 May 2016

Accepted 2 June 2016

### Keywords:

Shyness

Social skills

School setting

Education

Intervention

Assistance strategies

## ABSTRACT

The study focused on the way teachers can help shy pupils in the school setting. Its objective was to identify educators' perceptions of the subject and the strategies they could employ with such pupils. To that end, a thematic analysis was performed on the responses attained from fifteen in-depth interviews with educators. The main finding is that teachers' perceptions of shy pupils are skewed insofar as they don't adequately consider shy pupils' internal experiences. Practical strategies for assisting such pupils were also introduced. These strategies are demonstrated and discussed in the context of the theoretical literature on assisting shy pupils.

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary research, emphasis is placed on the non-cognitive skills among children and teenagers (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). It is known today that between cognitive, social, verbal, and emotional capabilities there are reciprocal relations (Malecki & Elliot, 2002). All are molded by the child's experiences and contribute to his or her success in society (Heckman, 2006). The present article intends to focus on one aspect of the wide spectrum of social competences and deficits – shyness. Its objective is to create an organized 'theoretical envelope' for understanding the way in which the teachers can help these pupils in the school

framework.

This need arises from the educational field. Teachers consider the development of the pupils' social skills to be part of their role (Zwaans, van der Veen, Volman, & ten Dam, 2008) but they aren't sure how to behave with shy pupils (Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor, 2011) and are interested in acquiring knowledge on the subject (Fisher, Masia-Warner, & Klein, 2004). Thus the goal of this article is to develop for shy pupils relevant interventions anchored in the school context.

### 1.1. Theoretical background

Shyness is one of the types of 'social withdrawal' (a process in which children deprive themselves of opportunities for social interaction with their peers) (Coplan et al., 2013; Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). It is defined as a temperamental trait characterized by amplified worry, fear, and self-consciousness in social situations

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(Kalutskaya, Archbell, Moritz Rudasill, & Coplan, 2015; Rubin et al., 2009). The temperament that characterizes inhibited children refers to their being cautious and reserved in their evaluation of the situation and of their resources before action (Kagan, 1989). In order to avoid the stigma that the word shyness evokes in everyday language, as a generalization of the entirety of an individual's personality, and in order to enable a dynamic and flexible approach to the term, it appears in the title of the article in quotation marks.

Shyness has positive and negative implications. The positive ones refer to the fact that these children tend to learn from observation rather than experience; as a result, they may develop the skill of paying attention to details and the willingness to listen to others. In addition, they tend to pay attention to their inner world (Clain, 2011). Accordingly, it's been found that these children are capable of forming close and influential friendships and to preserve them for a long time (Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce, & Burgess, 2006). During the period of emerging adulthood, a connection has been found between shyness and a low level of potentially dangerous behavior (such as alcohol consumption) (Nelson et al., 2008); therefore, at that age it may be seen as a sort of protective factor against social activities that could lead to damage.

As opposed to this, shyness also has implications of a negative hue. On the educational plane, it is connected to the child's functionality in the realm of learning (Kalutskaya et al., 2015). Shy children tend to talk less. As to the connection between shyness and language, different explanations were proposed, among which are the hesitant nature that is characteristic of these children and a lack of practice (Coplan & Evans, 2009). The phenomenon has other implications in the educational realm, such as the diversion of the children's thoughts from the realm of their studies to the impression they make on others (Kalutskaya et al., 2015), a low level of active participation in class, and consequently less correlation between the methods of instruction and the needs of the pupils. In addition, among these children, the circumstances under which an exam is administered have been found to affect the quality of performance: less successful face to face than in a group (Crozier & Hostettler, 2003). The suggested explanation for this is that these pupils feel more at ease when they are not the center of attention.

Shyness has also implications on the socio-emotional plane. It's been found that shyness in children and adolescents is connected to degrees of social anxiety, depressive symptoms, and negative attributional style (Coplan et al., 2013). These children tend to develop a low self-image (Lund, 2008) and to be more introverted (Lawrence & Bennett, 1992). In a study done among college students, a connection was found between shyness and general psychopathology (Heiser, Turner, & Beidel, 2003). There are also data that point to depression and anxiety in emerging adulthood and to a low quality of relationships (Nelson et al., 2008). A recent study (Nelson, 2013) identifies shyness, in its various forms, as a significant risk factor for internalizing problems, and for relationship troubles during this period of life.

As to the development of shyness, accepted thinking sees biological factors as the basis for its manifestation (Rubin et al., 2009). Most children who seem shy during the second year of their lives, tend to retain that profile; it's been found that when they reach eight years of age they still haven't acquired the characteristic behavior of uninhibited children, and they hold onto various fears (such as being afraid to speak in class or to participate in summer camp) (Kagan, 1989). That being said, it is known that environmental factors (Miller & Coll, 2007) and a combination of factors also have effect. For example, it was reported that children who are prone to social wariness, when faced with instances of exclusion, tend to withdraw from the company of the children, but in its absence show heightened involvement (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004).

Therefore, it's been emphasized how important it is for educators to help these children at an early age (Nelson et al., 2008).

The theoretical literature indicates that at a young age, it is possible to assist shy children (Harris & Brown, 1982). The factors considered to contribute are the existence of a supportive connection with caregivers, connections with peers and friendships, involvement in success-oriented activities, and participation in organized sports activities (Miller & Coll, 2007). Likewise, the implementation of pupil-centered teaching techniques has been suggested (Kalutskaya et al., 2015). Since reciprocal relations exist among all these elements, the progression towards social ability is in its essence a team effort (Miller & Coll, 2007).

There are programs that produce good results among pre-schoolers who are characterized by social anxiety for improving abilities and decreasing wary behaviors such as reticence, isolating oneself, and open expressions of anxiety (Coplan, Schneider, Matheson, & Graham, 2010). Other programs focus on the aspect of guiding parents and are auspicious in decreasing social anxiety among children before they enter school (Rapee, Kennedy, Ingram, Edwards, & Sweeney, 2005). In addition, there are intervention programs, such as "FRIENDS for life", that are implementable in educational frameworks and bear positive results in decreasing students' anxieties (Rodgers & Dunsmuir, 2015).

Assistance inside the educational framework has many advantages. First of all, school naturally provides its students with a variety of experiences that contribute to their psycho-social development. This is especially essential for children who tend to develop social fears, since in the context of their school attendance, they are required to experience at least a minimal amount of social interaction (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004). Secondly, this assistance doesn't require taking the child out of the classroom.

The present study will focus on the methods of assistance available to educators in the framework of the class and the school. This approach is based on a holistic perception of education and instruction, addressing different layers in the life of the pupil, including emotional and social aspects. In the theoretical literature there are descriptions of different plans for the development of social skills in the school framework (e.g., Forgan & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2004; Schoenfeld, Rutherford, Gable, & Rock, 2008). The present study aims to contribute an additional level, focusing on the shyness phenomenon.

### 1.2. *The present study-its importance and the research questions*

In light of the consequences of shyness for the child's future, the necessity and the possibility of helping him or her at an early age, and the importance of finding means of assistance within the school framework, the present study will examine the methods of assistance available to educators. The broad context in which this is embedded – the addressing of psychological aspects in education and instruction – is relevant to educators, policy makers and researchers in teacher education around the world.

The present study joins other research from recent years that examined educational experiences with shy pupils (e.g., Akseer, Bosacki, Rose-Krasnor, & Coplan, 2014; Bosacki, Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, & Hughes, 2011; Coplan et al., 2011). Its main objective is to thoroughly examine the teachers' perceptions and to go into detail with regard to the manner in which intervention processes occur in the school framework. The point of view is that of the educators themselves. This observation is intended to grant them authentic voicing with regard to their perceptions and their actions relating to their shy pupils. Since there is a need to understand the complexity of the subject, i.e. to thoroughly map out these perceptions and to obtain a thick description (Morrow, 2005) of the applied strategies, a qualitative methodology was chosen.

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