Mentalising school.
Could the development of the ability to mentalise
support the functioning of students, parents,
and teachers in the school environment?
An attempt at answering the question, taking into
account reports from international research

Abstract: Mentalisation is a multifaceted cognitive activity, which enables individuals to interpret the behaviours of others (and their own) in terms of intentional mental states. A person, who engages in mentalisation, is aware that human behaviour stems from one’s mental state. The ability to mentalise begins to develop in childhood, primarily through safe relationships with caregivers, but it can be cultivated throughout life thanks to, among others, functioning in a mentalising environment, such as a school. This article aims to address the question of whether developing the ability to mentalise can support the functioning of students, parents, and teachers in the school environment. Findings from previous research and interventions conducted in various parts of the world not only provide an affirmative answer to this question, but also identify the characteristics of a mentalising school which caters to the need for future-oriented education.

Keywords: mentalisation, psychological interventions, mental health, school environment.
Introduction

Mentalisation is a term that has recently become increasingly popular in the psychological and psychotherapeutic community. ‘Mentalising refers to the activity of understanding behaviour as being related to states of mind, such as thoughts and feelings’ (Allen et al., 2014, p. 19). The mentalisation theory is an umbrella concept, which encompasses a wide range of intrapsychic processes and integrates theoretical contributions from different disciplines: neuropsychology, psychoanalysis, attachment theory or the theory of mind (Luyten et al., 2020).

Mentalising disorders, which usually entail poor use or integration of information about the mental state – one’s own or others, occur across the spectrum of mental disorders (Luyten et al., 2020). The diminished ability to mentalise is considered a primary neuropsychological deficit in autism spectrum disorders (Castelli et al., 2002; Philip et al., 2012), or borderline personality disorders (Allen and Fonagy, 2006). However, people with other mental disorders (e.g., those suffering from depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, eating disorders) may also experience difficulties with adequate mentalising (Fonagy and Bateman, 2011; Sharp and Venta, 2012). Similarly to any healthy person, in a highly stressful situation (Bak et al., 2015).

Promising research results on the effectiveness of Mentalisation Based Treatment (MBT), encourage the use of this concept not only for the treatment of mental disorders, but also for their prevention. It seems valuable to design mentalising interventions and implement them in non-clinical contexts, i.e. in schools (Fonagy et al., 2009; Valle et al., 2016). It has been shown so far that, for example, the use of a mentalisation approach throughout the school system, can be effective in reducing violence (Fonagy et al., 2009).

In this article, I aim at answering the titular question: Could development of the ability to mentalise support the functioning of students, parents, and teachers in the school environment? Thereby, I introduce the concept of mentalising, present research findings concerning mentalising in schools, describe exemplary interventions from different parts of the world, to conclude with a summary of the most significant features of a mentalising school.

Mentalisation and its role in the social world

We mentalise when we are aware of states of mind – our own and that of others, when we think about feelings, reflect on the causes of misunderstandings, when we ‘look at ourselves from the inside and at others from within’ (Allen et al., 2014, p. 27). Mentalisation is an activity of the imagination – it implies the ability to imagine what another person might
be thinking or feeling, but also to pay attention to what is going on in one's own mind (Cierpiątkowska and Górska, 2016, p. 43). The teacher mentalises, when he or she wonders why a student is sad, or when he or she notices one's own fatigue and looks for ways to take care of himself or herself. At the same time, it is worth to emphasise that mentalisation can be both conscious, controlled, systematic (when we think that we are thinking), but can also take place in a preconscious, intuitive, rapid manner (when we think, but are not aware of it) (Allen et al., 2014, p 57).

The ability to mentalise plays an extremely important role in everyday life; it enables us to understand ourselves, other people, predict social events, and allows us to form satisfying interpersonal relationships (Adamczyk, 2013). Given that the essence of mentalising is the ability to notice, predict and react to both one's own mental states and those of others, it seems that building societies would not be possible had we not been endowed with this ability (Twemlow et al., 2005). Perceiving the other as an individual possessing a distinct state of mind is a unique, human characteristic. According to currently available knowledge, no animal can distinguish between accidental actions and those resulting from intentions, wishes, beliefs, or desires (Twemlow et al., 2005).

The human ability to mentalise is partly innate and partly acquired (Fonagy and Target, 1997). The acquisition of this ability depends on the quality of the attachment relationship and, in particular, on the ability of caregivers to adequately reflect the mental states of the child (Adamczyk, 2013). Caregivers notice, understand and 'give back' the child's emotions, while doing so in a slightly exaggerated and emphasised way, so that the little one can notice that the sadness on, for example, mum's face does not belong to her, but is the child's own emotion, reflected as if in a mirror. Through adequate mirroring, empathy and sensitivity of the caregivers, children learn to regulate their own emotions and, as they grow, gradually acquire the ability to define and give meaning to mental states (Adamczyk, 2013). On the one hand, a secure bond with the caregiver allows for the development of the ability to mentalise; on the other hand, mentalising leads to the development of a safe attachment pattern, and this in turn promotes trusting, calm functioning in the social world (Bowlby, 1973).

Importantly, although the development of the ability to mentalise begins to evolve in childhood, the skill can be cultivated throughout one's entire life. Not only through psychotherapeutic programmes such as MBT, whose effectiveness has been confirmed in studies around the world (Bateman et al., 2022). An individual's ability to mentalise also largely depends
on the extent to which the environment, in which he or she exists, can be
defined as a mentalising environment. That is one, in which it is discussed
why people behave the way they do, why they do what they do, what their
emotions and behaviours stem from. A mentalising environment can be the
family, culture in a broad sense, the local community, as well as the school
(Twemlow et al., 2005).

Mentalisation at school

Mentalisation plays an important role wherever people build relation-
ships, especially if it is an adult-child relationship (Valle et al., 2022). Up to
this point, a substantial amount of research on the environment that is favo-
urale for the development of mentalisation has been focused on the family.
Meanwhile teachers, similarly to parents, can be the objects of attachment
(Howes and Spieker, 2008; Pianta, 1999). Teachers are adults, whose role
is to take care of the needs of the child, to participate in the child’s process
of discovering the world, to support the child in developing its capacity to
understand reality. Research shows that the quality of the student-teacher
relationship, carries over into the child’s social and emotional development,
behaviour, well-being and even school achievement (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et
al., 1995; 2003; 2019). There are also studies, which indicate a link between
the teacher-student attachment relationship and the ability to mentalise
and regulate emotions among school-aged children (Valle et al., 2016). The
authors of the study suggest that a trusting relationship between the stu-
dent and the teacher contributes to a safe classroom atmosphere, which is
beneficial for mentalising. There is no doubt that schools with adults able to
mentalise create an environment, where students can develop their ability
to understand their own and other people’s mental states (Bak et al., 2015,
Twemlow et al., 2005; Valle et al., 2016). In turn, this leads to a number of
other beneficial effects, which apply not only to children, but also to adults.
The ability to mentalise has been shown to be positively related to teachers’
psychological well-being. Mentalisation counterbalances the negative impact
of stress, prevents professional burnout and thus has a protective function
in the case of teachers (Safiye et al., 2023; Schwarzer et al., 2021).

People who have a fully developed ability to mentalise are more
forgiving of each other, more willing to help each other, they also find it
harder to hurt another person. It is therefore no coincidence that one of
the earliest and best-known mentalisation-based interventions, which was
developed in response to social (not clinical) issues, was designed to reduce
violence in schools (Twemlow et al., 2005). The Peaceful Schools Program,
was implemented in the USA in 1994 to enable the creation of *mentalising school communities* to counter violence and bullying among students. The intervention contained several elements, such as campaigns to foster a positive school climate; training for teachers on how to respond to crisis situations (non-violent, using mentalisation); a physical education programme during which children trained self-control; and finally, ten-minute mentalisation talks at the end of each day. A detailed description of the programme was included in a manual, made available online by the authors (Twemlow, 1999), in order to increase the accuracy and replicability of the programme in other facilities (Twemlow, 2005).

However, the Peaceful Schools Programme is not the only one that draws on mentalisation theory and successfully addresses the challenges of the modern school. In recent years, various programmes have been described, which were applied to work with students, parents and teachers in schools from different parts of the world (Bak et al, 2015; Gershoy et al, 2023; Twemlow et al, 2011; Valle et al, 2016). Importantly, the interventions undertaken responded to different challenges, depending on the socio-cultural context and current needs. Below, I describe three examples of intervention programmes from three different countries: Denmark, Israel and Jamaica. The selected interventions target different groups of subjects constituting the school community: students and teachers or parents. The programmes also address different types of challenges, demonstrating that the mentalisation approach is universal and can support the functioning of the school community in the face of many, difficult situations.

**Denmark**

Researchers from Denmark proposed an intervention programme based on the mentalisation theory that aimed to strengthen students’ psychological resilience (Bak et al., 2015). Resilience (psychological resistance), is understood as an individual’s ability to cope with adversity, including the ability to recover from unfortunate life events and psychological trauma (Zutra et al., 2010). A fully developed ability to mentalise promotes mental resilience, allows one to understand one’s own emotions and to connect them to behaviour (Tohme et al., 2022).

The programme to enhance psychological resilience (Resilience Program), was developed between 2005 and 2007. It was a psychological intervention drawing on the knowledge of mentalisation, neuropsychology and social cognition (Bak et al., 2015). The authors of the programme were asked for help by one of the Danish social organisations, because of the numerous
destructive behaviours displayed by young people, largely immigrants from Middle Eastern countries. Three years after the programme was implementation, the majority of the employees in the organisation were still using it, they found the programme to be particularly valuable, and they indicated that the spread of knowledge about mentalisation and neurobiology was extremely helpful in their daily work. They also noticed a reduction in the number of problematic behaviours exhibited by young people (Bak et al., 2015).

Although the programme appears to be discontinued (the intervention websites are not active), it is worth noting some of its features, which favour the possibility of a wide application of this programme category in educational institutions. Firstly, the intervention took the form of a modular, flexible workshop made available online. Secondly, it was designed to be applicable in any organisational context, including in combination with other interventions. Thirdly, wherever it was possible, the authors suggested using a social model, which included the whole organisation and all the people who were a part of the system. Fourthly, according to the assurances by the authors, after a short training, the programme could not only be used by any specialist, but also by non-professionals, including parents and students. Importantly as well, the programme could be used as preventive or as part of a support component for people with mental health problems.

Isreal

In Israel, an intervention based on the mentalisation theory was offered to parents (Gershy et al., 2023). The programme was implemented via the Internet, and aimed to develop the ability of the parent to mentalise the mental and emotional states of the child whilst doing homework together. The intervention, therefore, addressed a challenge faced by many parents, from different parts of the world. Previous research has shown that parental involvement in doing homework can be a source of autonomous learning motivation for the child, a sense of self-efficacy, and an opportunity to learn self-regulation (Cooper et al, 2012; Grolnick et al, 1991; Pomerantz et al, 2005). On the other hand, misunderstood support can have the opposite effect, being a source of stress and frustration for both the student and the parent (Cooper et al., 2012; Katz et al., 2012). Factors which reduce the effectiveness of parental support during homework assignments mainly include parental control and negative emotionality, which can manifest as i.e. taking responsibility for the tasks of the child, putting too much pressure, excessive monitoring and checking, impatience, or hostility and derogatory comments (Grolnick et al., 1997; Pomerantz and Eaton, 2001).
The proposed intervention focused on the parents’ ability to reflect, mentalise the needs of their child before offering to help with homework. Thirty-seven Israeli families participated in the study (21 were assigned to the experimental group, 16 to the control group). The main part of the programme was to encourage parents to observe their child for a period of two weeks, prior to doing homework together. During a meeting with the researcher, parents were taught an observation technique, given a specially prepared guide and asked to observe their child for five minutes each day and complete a form about the observation. The results have shown that even such a simple intervention brings positive results, contributes to the development of parental mentality, their curiosity about the mind of the child, and supports the development of learner autonomy. Naturally, the authors of the study indicate some limitations, point out the pilot nature of the intervention, however, they also emphasise its advantages, the fact that it is short, easy to implement and accessible to all parents.

**Jamaica**

In Jamaica, in turn, the intervention was based on the aforementioned Peaceful Schools Programme. This intervention has improved academic performance, reduced aggression and increased pro-sociality among students (Twemlow et al., 2011). A remedial programme based on the mentalisation theory (Allen et al., 2014) and the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) was implemented in an institution with multiple, diverse problems. It was a school suffering from the atmosphere of fear and suspicion about the motives of others. Adults, whose role was to look after the welfare of pupils, were overwhelmed and hopeless. Any behaviour that deviated from violent norms i.e. helping others was considered a sign of weakness (Twemlow et al., 2011).

It is worth to outline the context, in which the school functioned. According to the authors of the article, which was published in 2011, the educational process was highly valued by the Jamaican society at the time. Parents placed great hope in the educational success of their children, and tied their hopes for a better future to them. However, this was not reflected in the school funding system, which did not provide adequate support for the children, for example, there was no organised transport, school meals, assistance for children with educational or emotional difficulties. There was a high degree of disparity between pupils, with some being well cared for, prepared and fed, while others clearly neglected, left to fend for themselves and sometimes simply hungry. Lessons were conducted in overcrowded,
stuffy classrooms with no space for either the pupils or the teachers. The use of physical punishment was permitted.

The intervention programme was targeted at students in the older classes, who tended to step into the role of bullies towards younger pupils, themselves being not favoured by the teachers, seen as the ones who cause problems, with is no hope of success. In order to develop a mentalising attitude among the pupils, the Peace Centre was set up – a workshop, where students, together with instructors (belonging to the local community), did manual work (i.e. making beads, weaving baskets, embroidering). Learning to mentalise took place in the meantime. The instructors talked to the students, modelled desirable, helpful behaviours, reflected with the students on the causes of different events. They created space for empathising and helping. They responded to conflicts whenever they arose. Just as importantly, the food of the children was also provided. The centre became a meeting place, where pupils were fed, felt safe and could count on each other. As the children began to mentalise, warmer relationships between them emerged. Over time, the programme also gained support among the teachers, who noticed beneficial changes. Importantly, the creators of the programme did not impose new pedagogical methods on them, but encouraged the use of less repressive ways of coping with challenges. The implementation of the intervention allowed for the creation of such a school atmosphere, which fostered understanding and thinking, seeing another human being. This in turn increased the feeling of safety among students and teachers, and also allowed for cooperation.

Conclusion

The modern school should educate for the future. In turn, the prerequisites for a well-functioning person of the future include, among others, mental health and the ability to cooperate with other people (Pyżalski and Plewka, 2022). This is precisely what mentalisation fosters. In the face of a rapidly changing world, numerous civilisation challenges, and with an increasing number of mental health problems, we need simple and effective psychological and pedagogical interventions to support the functioning of students, teachers and parents. Through research conducted in different parts of the world, it can be concluded that the mentalisation based approach makes it possible to build effective intervention programmes, which respond to the various needs and difficulties occurring in the school environment. Then perhaps, the school of the future is a mentalising school, i.e. one, in which:
1. The aim of upbringing is to develop the ability to mentalise;
2. One is encouraged to reflect on the reasons for one’s own and other people’s behaviour;
3. A safe relationship can be built;
4. There is no violence;
5. There is time to talk.

References:


