



Mentalization and Its Use in Schools

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Abstract: *This article outlines the current state of theoretical knowledge about mentalization, which appears to be essential for effective practice in the teaching profession. Mentalization is the capacity to understand and make sense of our own and others' actions by recognising and giving meaning to intentional mental states, including needs, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and motivations. It is the understanding of the background of the behaviour – the understanding of the mental states that have led to a certain behaviour. Thanks to mentalization theory, we are now able to think and discuss in more detail what happens between and within people as they interact in different social contexts such as schools. These skills are useful for teachers as they work with children, whose mentalizing skills are still developing. At the same time, in their practice, teachers often encounter children who come to school with disruptive behaviours, insecure attachment styles, and negative internal working models of relationships that make the healthy development of mentalizing skills difficult. This article highlights the importance of mentalization in educational contexts and provides a framework for interventions aimed at increasing mentalization skills among teachers, parents, and students. Empirical evidence has shown that the implementation of mentalization-based programmes in schools can lead to significant improvements in teacher resilience, as well as a reduction of aggressive behaviour among students and an improvement of their academic performance.*

Keywords: *mentalization, epistemic trust, mental health, attachment, healthy schools*

MENTALIZATION

The theory of mentalization was developed by combining ideas from psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, and cognitive neuroscience. It describes the way people make sense of interpersonal interactions by imagining the seemingly unobvious mental states behind behaviours in themselves and others (Fonagy et al., 2002; Bateman & Fonagy, 2013). Mentalization

is a reflective function, or a form of imaginative activity, in which we perceive and interpret human behaviour as intentional, that is, as arising from certain needs, desires, emotions, beliefs, and reasons behind that behavior (Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Bateman & Fonagy, 2013). If we perceive this intentionality correctly, we can think about other people and ourselves with greater understanding, tolerance, and compassion. Through mentalization,



we can understand conflicts and misunderstandings by trying to put ourselves in the other person's position. We are also able to understand why we got into a certain situation, why something happened, which is essential for a sense of meaning in life. Mentalizing means seeing oneself "from the outside" and other people "from the inside", i.e. being able to include the other person's mind in one's own to some extent, and realising that the other person has, and is allowed to have, his or her own experience and thinking – his or her own perspective (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). Mentalizing is what makes us human (Fonagy et al., 2002).

According to Fonagy and Target (2003), the ability to consciously focus on the mentalization of one's own emotions is at the core of intersubjectivity, where we understand each other in complex ways that go far beyond intellectual understanding. Mentalization can be understood as the imaginative mental activity, or imagination, that takes place in the human mind (Fonagy et al., 2002). Imagination here refers to the ability to be aware of mental states – both emotional and cognitive experiences of oneself and others – when interpreting behaviour. It also reflects our ability to imagine the impact of our behaviour on other people, as well as our ability to retrospectively represent our own mental states in our minds, through which self-awareness and continuity of identity develop. We rely on this

imagination in our social cognition – because we cannot know for sure what is going on in other people's minds (e.g. in a student's mind), we have to imagine (Fonagy et al., 2002; Luyten et al., 2020a) and then validate our imagination, which may be speculative, through mentalizing communication.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MENTALIZATION IN ONTOGENESIS

In order for a child to develop the ability to realistically experience their own internal states, i.e. healthy self-awareness and self-concept, developmental experience with a sensitive, responsive caregiver is essential. In the context of a secure attachment relationship, where the primary caregiver is interested in the child's mind, the child can safely explore their mind. The child's systematic and ongoing experience of being positively represented in the caregiver's mind as a thinking and feeling intentional being shapes their own future ability to navigate later relationships and to choose adaptive solutions to interpersonal conflict (Fonagy et al., 2002). According to Luyten et al. (2020b), mentalization is currently understood to depend on the emotional availability of the caregiver and the extent to which the child's subjective experiences are adequately mirrored by this trusted counterpart,



leading to the development of affective regulation and self-control, including attention and will, as well as the capacity for mentalization. Secure attachment and the emotional availability of the caregiver co-create a socialisation context in which the child's inner life and mental world are an important value. This promotes the development of mentalization, which begins to take shape through the "discovery" of affect through the sensitive mirroring of the child's emotions by the primary caregiver, i.e. in the context of relationships (Siegel, 2021). The healthy mother usually makes a mistake at first in reading the child's signals, but this leads the child to try to mentalize her internal states as well (ibid.). Gradually, the child becomes interested in the parent's mind and tries to read it. It is through the parent's mind that the child learns about itself. They ask: "How can I do it right?", "What have I done wrong?", "Should I be scared now or don't I have to be?" And they turn to the parent – they look at the parent all the time – how does the parent see it? Reading the healthy and trusting mind of a parent is beneficial and enjoyable for the child. It is a path to important insights about oneself and the world. The ability of primary caregivers to offer ostensive, reflective, and mentalized responses to the child's expressions helps the child develop the ability to regulate stress and trust others as a source of comfort and support (Asen & Fonagy, 2021).

It could be said that the parent's mind is an "incubator" for the child's mind. The parent "holds" the child in their mind, providing "scaffolding", and the child can see himself or herself in the parent's eyes (Fonagy et al., 2002). A child learns to mentalize only when he or she is mentalized – when the parent approaches the child as if he or she had a mind (agency). Parents share their image of the child with the child, showing that they see and understand the child's emotions, but they mirror the child's expressions in a slightly amplified manner known as "marked mirroring". Markedness, as described by Fonagy et al. (ibid.), refers to the exaggerated mirroring of a child's emotions that is different from the caregiver's own realistic emotional expression. It is also important that caregivers mirror the child's emotions, such as happiness, sadness, or anger, accurately enough (contingently), rather than projecting their own emotions onto the child. This is called "congruent mirroring". Thus, contingency implies a basic congruence between caregiver mirroring and the child's actual emotional experience, whereas markedness refers to the exaggerated "as if" quality of mirroring that distinguishes it from the caregiver's realistic emotional displays (Fonagy et al., 2002; Drozek & Unruh, 2020). When a caregiver consistently mirrors a child's emotional expressions in a marked and congruent way, the child can clearly recognise



its own emotions in the caregiver's reflection (ibid). Through this process, the child develops a "secondary, cognitively accessible representation of his or her primary emotional state" (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 192). This secondary representation is formed as the child's primary emotions are filtered through the caregiver's mind and "returned" to the child in the caregiver's facial expression, signalling: "I see that this is your feeling, I'm reflecting it back to you in a clear way to let you know that I know, so that you can know it too."

This means that if the caregiver mirrors the child's emotions through tone of voice, facial expressions, and behaviour, and the child experiences stress relief as a result, the child will not only learn to understand his or her own emotions, but will eventually learn to regulate them (Cooper & Redfern, 2015). Gradually, the child learns the sequences of regulated emotional states, begins to recognise them, associate words with them, and symbolise them (Fonagy et al., 2002). It follows that for children who grow up in a secure relational environment, other people become enriching. At the same time, these children can develop a sense of narrative continuity and autonomy, which is also experienced as enriching. The capacity for self-regulation and co-regulation are thus mutually reinforcing (Luyten et al., 2021). However, if the caregiver does not adequately mirror the child's inner states, the child

may still internalise representations of the caregiver's subjective states instead of their own (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019; Nišpovská, 2023). This leads to inner fragmentation and confusion, a distressing sense of separation from one's own primary emotional experience, and the development of a psychological structure called the "alien self" (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 320).

A key factor in the development of mentalization is the ability to focus shared attention on mental contents – on feelings and thoughts (Tomasello, 2019). The acquisition of this ability occurs in the context of secure relationships, in which the parent takes an active interest in the child's mind. This shared attention conditions other skills such as social competence, the ability to accept and appreciate the other's different perspective, and empathy (Fonagy & Target, 2003). In this sense, parents can be seen as organisers of the attention system (Fearon & Belsky, 2004), and the infant is initially dependent on the caregiver's ability to pay responsive, kind, and non-invasive attention to the infant's signals and internal states. This function, which is provided and initiated by the parent, is internalised by the infant, which means that the infant is later able to attend to and regulate its own internal states independently of the parent. The regulation of attention is fundamental in this respect, because the identification of stimuli coming



from within is a basic condition for the ability to reflect and regulate internal states. If others around us did not force us to focus on our subjective experiences, mentalization would not occur – just as an eighteen-month-old child would not just start talking unless we addressed them and spoke to them (Asen & Fonagy, 2021).

**DEFICITS IN MENTALIZATION
AS AN ADAPTATION
TO THREATENING
RELATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Negative early experiences, where the caregiver is not responsive and sensitive, can threaten the natural development of the mentalizing skills that we acquire by being mentalized and trying to mentalize both ourselves and others. Lack of adequate care in the context of family neglect often leads to the development of insecure attachment, which threatens the child's sense of security in exploring and interpreting mental states in the context of intimate relationships (Midgley et al., 2017; Siegel, 2021). Reading the mind of an untrustworthy, unstable parent is an almost impossible task for a child – seeing and understanding unregulated intense emotions (aggression, disgust, contempt) is frightening and destabilising, and it may happen that the child defensively and self-protectively “shuts down” reflective functions. Indeed, knowing the parent's

mind would only continue to hurt and destabilise the child. For children and young people with a history of neglect, abuse, or disrupted attachment, the experience of interaction and relationships with people, including relationships with teachers, is not experienced as rewarding, but as adding to their distress (Siegel, 2021). Therefore, for these children, reliance on caregivers is not rewarding, but is instead associated with increased vulnerability and increased distress, which may manifest itself as physiological dysfunction of the stress system – its hyperactivation or hypoactivation (Strathearn, 2011; Bo et al., 2017). These findings are important for educators' understanding of how to educate insecurely attached children (Luyten et al., 2021). Although these children desire and need to be understood and cared for, their attachment system is overstimulated as a result, triggering further stress that has a negative effect on mentalization and, consequently, relationships. Teachers, in good faith, can easily overwhelm a child with warmth and support which, although well-intentioned, is paradoxically experienced by the child as threatening, with corresponding hostile reactions. An untrained teacher may perceive such a child as troubled, unmotivated, or ungrateful. Knowledge of the developmental context of mentalization allows for a more compassionate and rational pedagogical approach, understanding that the “problem” child may



not be behaving in an undesirable way deliberately, but that their previous life experiences have probably taught them that it is not worth trusting people; on the contrary, it is better to be constantly vigilant and to assume malevolent intentions in others (Hanson et al., 2017). Interpreting a child's disturbing behaviour as an adaptation to early negative experiences is consistent with John Bowlby's (1984/2023) theory of internal working models of relationships. These are assumptions, or personal predictions, about how other people might behave and what can be expected of them. They are formed in the child's mind during the sensitive period of development in response to very specific and repeated behaviours of caregivers. They are at the core of our identity, operate unconsciously, and are very stable over time. If the world of the original family not only fails to provide protection, but is also, in addition, a source of pain and harm, then it is easier to understand how the child grows up expecting harm from all the future caregivers and educators he or she will encounter (Fonagy et al., 2002).

Therefore, if mentalization only brings us complications and stress, it is possible to protect the self by not using it, as it is one of many possible states of mind. Although it is undoubtedly one of the most sophisticated mechanisms, on which nature has relied in the evolution of man, it is true that a child can survive without

developing the differentiated nuances of mentalization. If this happens, the child is likely to suffer later in life from relationship problems, maladaptive stress management, a reluctance to learn socially desirable knowledge, a tendency to accept information that is directed against someone or something (or oppositional in nature), and unregulated emotional shifts and fluctuations, and is likely to be perceived by others as unpredictable (Luyten et al., 2021). Indeed, reduced mentalizing impairs the child's adaptability to change, blocks openness to learning from experience, and increases the likelihood of maladaptive, rigid coping strategies not only for stressful situations but also for everyday life (*ibid.*). Today, there is a rapidly growing body of evidence that the ability to manage one's mental state effectively tends to be dramatically reduced in children who have experienced early adversity (Midgley et al., 2017; Asen & Fonagy, 2021). Part of the cognitive control that a child loses as a result of adversity or relational trauma is related to a limited ability to engage with the emotions and cognitions of those around them (*ibid.*). This also limits freedom, which in this respect means that a person chooses his or her emotions, does not deny them, and can regulate them, but at the same time recognizes and respects them (Adkins et al., 2018).

A key concept in this regard is the so-called epistemic trust that is



formed in the context of relationships with mentalizing caregivers, without which the student's learning of socially valuable knowledge within the educational process is rather ineffective (Csibra & Gergely, 2009; Sperber et al., 2010; Fonagy et al., 2017). The caregiver's mentalization influences the child's psychological development and integration into the social world by enabling epistemic trust, an attitude needed to take full advantage of opportunities to learn from others (Egyed et al., 2013; Fonagy et al., 2017). However, a neglectful, hostile, or abusive caregiver cannot be trusted to be a reliable source of relevant information about oneself or about others and the world. In this way, the child's motivation to learn from the adult is lost, that is, the so-called epistemic trust is not developed. This is because the motivation to learn, which is primarily about openness to receiving knowledge from other people, is not well enough imaginable in a child who, because of negative experiences, does not trust people to teach him or her anything useful (Asen & Fonagy, 2021). Thus, mentalization disorders can be seen as an adaptation to an untrustworthy social environment in which the perception of others' mental states as suspicious or malevolent serves short-term survival. In the long run, however, this strategy is harmful because it prevents effective social learning and creates an epistemic disadvantage that has profound negative

effects on the child's education (Hanson et al., 2017). Fonagy and Allison (2014) define epistemic trust as an individual's confidence that new knowledge coming from another person is authentic, trustworthy, generalisable, and relevant. Observation alone cannot teach a child everything needed to survive and thrive in complex human society. Social and cultural life is too complex, and in order to navigate this complexity, we need to learn from others through the process of socialisation, which is the process of integration into society through learning (Sperber et al., 2010). In order to establish epistemic trust, we need to be able to mentalize the other person well enough for them to feel seen and accurately understood. It is precisely the recognition of the inner state and its accurate narrative description, together with the interest in elaboration and clarification, that constitutes a particularly powerful mentalizing key to establishing a state of epistemic trust that makes learning possible (Asen & Fonagy, 2021).

MENTALIZATION AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

Mental health includes a sense of well-being and happiness, the ability to cope with life's stressors, and a sense of self-worth and control (Seligman,



2014). During their school years, students naturally experience stress, anxiety, and loss of control, as a response to both the daily tasks of school (Prabu, 2015) and challenging external events or severe stressors, such as the Covid pandemic, which brought many new and unexpected challenges to the mental health and well-being of children and young people. Another major stressor has been the outbreak of war in Ukraine, which can make it difficult for young people to feel safe and stable. Their still immature mentalization naturally increases their experience of stress in different situations (Schwarzer et al., 2021). If, thanks to a mentalizing teacher, children have a better understanding of how anxiety or other emotional difficulties manifest themselves, they are more likely to be able to deal with this stress effectively and take steps to accept help if they need it (Sorgenfrei et al., 2022). The ability to understand and regulate emotions leads to a reduction of symptoms of depression and anxiety in young people (Schäfer et al., 2017). Mentalizing teachers are able to support students regardless of their personal characteristics, family background, or wider circumstances, and to be models for building supportive relationships (Sorgenfrei et al., 2022). They can handle their own feelings, validate the facts that students may have heard, not catastrophise the future, and create a sense of stability, trust, and meaningfulness

within classroom relationships. By being a model of calm and normality, they can help young people cope with the situation and regain a sense of control. They can also provide support and explanation. Through sincere and positive interest in students' inner states, motivations, emotions, and difficulties, they encourage shared attention and thus enable students to identify better with a common "we", leading to greater class cohesion.

Interventions that promote mentalizing interactions in schools have been shown to be effective in reducing maladaptive and disruptive behaviours, regardless of the type of stress, and improving the social skills, personal well-being, and overall mental health of students and teachers (Twemlow et al., 2017; Schwarzer et al., 2021). These strategies are also important for academic success, as the inability to understand and regulate one's emotions, such as anxiety, has been found to predict lower academic motivation, as well as lower overall achievement and life satisfaction in adulthood (Oerlemans et al., 2020).

MENTALIZATION AND GROUP DYNAMICS IN THE CLASSROOM

Very few, if any, younger school-age children who find themselves in a non-mentalizing school system are able to maintain some degree of mentaliza-



tion. This is because in such a system (e.g. a bullying school system) everyone loses their individuality in favour of a narrowing social role that promotes social stereotypes and pathological group behaviour, making it difficult to distinguish or mentalize the individual student at all (Twemlow & Sacco, 2013). The unique individual presence of the other is suppressed, even negated, by the demands of the stereotypical social role. In the extreme, the student feels completely defined by the social system and his or her sense of reality is rooted in the fact that this reality is shared by others (Twemlow et al., 2017). On a broader scale, when this social reality is influenced by power dynamics, whether through individual psychopathology, especially of leaders, or through the excessive use of coercion and punishment in implicit or explicit codes of behaviour, the mindset of victim, aggressor, and bystander is created in the members of this system. Students then function in the roles created by this non-mentalizing social system (ibid.). In summary, a chronic failure of mentalization occurs in a violent environment. In most social contexts we need dialogue, response, and support from others to maintain mentalization. Mentalization therefore requires an “intelligent” social system to support it and ensure that reflection on mental states is relatively complex, socially desirable, and includes not only positive but also neutral and painful mental states (ibid.).

Mentalizing teachers are likely to be able to empathise effectively with themselves and their students, regulate their emotions, set boundaries, take responsibility for their actions, and engage in reflective practice. Likewise, educational social groups that facilitate the flourishing of these qualities in individuals will work better together (Twemlow et al., 2017; Adkins et al., 2018). Dysfunctional social systems cause the breakdown of mentalization and lead to highly reactive, tense, and defensive interactions that can lead to violence. This risk is not unique to children. Adults in a school environment – whether teachers, administrators, or support staff – also need support in maintaining their mentalizing skills, especially when faced with highly anxious, affective, aggressive, or hostile student behaviour. Mentalization is a highly interactive process, and even adults with strong mentalizing skills will face significant challenges in a stressful school environment without support (Twemlow et al., 2017; Fonagy et al., 2009). Higher levels of mentalizing may help teachers to tolerate and contain student distress, which is also thought to be helpful for teachers, and may also help students to regulate their emotions by modelling reflective thinking about emotions and behaviours. Such self-regulation is important for children’s social and relational development and is a key factor in the development of mentaliz-



ing skills (Fonagy et al., 2005, 2009). The more a school can function as a large, safe, accepting, coordinated group and avoid social dynamics that allow for the creation of unhealthy social roles (such as a victim who learns to be powerless when a group is dominated by bullies), the more creativity and personal growth are possible (Adkins et al., 2018). In summary, when the mentalizations and power dynamics in a group are well balanced, individuals in the group feel good and want to feel even better by helping others whenever needed (Twemlow et al., 2017).

INTERVENTIONS TO STRENGTHEN MENTALIZATION IN SCHOOLS

Given the protective value of mentalizing skills and the high levels of stress reported among teachers, a mentalization-based approach provides a framework that could help them cope with daily stressors and negative emotions and have a positive impact on their subjective well-being and overall mental health. Psychosocial stress is associated with a temporary reduction of mentalizing capacity, particularly in the higher cortical executive areas of the brain (Nolte et al., 2013). A situationally reduced mentalizing capacity can then lead to inaccurate reading and interpretation

of social situations, misunderstandings, and unnecessary conflicts, which can further trigger stress in situations where people who were utilizing mentalization fully would communicate reflectively and with ease and empathy. Preventive mentalization-based programmes can help teachers to sustain mentalization even in situations where they would otherwise typically experience unregulated stress. These skills are extremely useful for teachers, because they often work with children who come to school with behavioural problems, attachment issues, and negative internal working models of relationships (Rossouw et al., 2021; Sharp et al., 2013). When a child's non-mentalizing and disorganized family system consistently makes them feel threatened, the child's attachment system can become hyperactivated, undermining their higher executive functioning. An increased number of students with activated attachment systems, in a state of unregulated stress, can force the entire class group to shift into pre-mentalization modes of thinking. Such a non-mentalizing social system can be highly self-reinforcing, as it tends to undermine the social mechanism that could change its unhealthy nature and rigid, stuck dynamics – human cooperation based on negotiation and creativity (Twemlow et al., 2017).

The first school intervention aimed directly at strengthening the mentalization of students and teachers was



the Peaceful Schools Program, which aimed to create mentalizing school communities that would reduce violence and bullying. Its authors based their approach on two assumptions: (1) violent individuals and communities have impaired mentalizing, and (2) the power dynamics involving these individuals and their communities tend to further reduce the mentalizing capacities of all involved (Twemlow et al., 2005a, 2005b; Fonagy et al., 2005, 2009). The programme resulted in a reduction in the frequency of aggressive behaviour and an increase in the frequency of prosocial behaviour among students (Twemlow et al., 2005a, 2005b).

The Peaceful Schools Program was revised in 2017 by the original team of researchers, including Chloe Campbell, under the acronym CAPSLE: “Creating a Peaceful School Learning Environment” (Twemlow et al., 2017). The goal of the new programme is now to improve the overall school climate and eliminate bullying behaviours. The programme is theoretically grounded in psychoanalysis (attachment theory and mentalization theory), neuroscience, and systems theory, which explain the interdependence between students’ unmentalized feelings of shame and their heightened need for control on the one hand and the power relational dynamics in the classroom on the other. The authors based their approach on three assumptions: (1) to reduce violence in schools,

it is necessary to systematically raise awareness of the mental states underlying behaviour. Attention should not be focused preferentially on “problem students” but on a general change of narrative with explicitly formulated mentalizing virtues, (2) the entire school community contributes to the dysfunction associated with bullying because of the normalised absence of mentalization, (3) peaceful cooperation between students requires mutual interest and consideration of the subjective states of others, thereby reducing the urge to control the behaviour of classmates in violent or passive-aggressive ways. The CAPSLE programme declares shared values that are preferred and respected. The social status of students is gradually built on the basis of being reflective, considerate, empathetic, in control of their own feelings, and as helpful as possible to others, i.e. mentalizing.

The main components of the programme are: (1) practical exercises with students focusing on a positive climate that encourages and supports awareness of mental states and the understanding that the absence of this awareness creates violent situations, contexts that tend to become cyclical, (2) training teachers in non-coercive classroom management, with a focus on constantly consolidating their own mentalization skills and reminding children of their mentalization skills, (3) the training of other adults (parents, siblings, volunteers) to become



mentors who are able to intervene in a mentalizing way during episodes of violence that take place outside the school, (4) a “peaceful warrior” physical education programme for students, which is training in agility, self-control, and stress reduction in violent situations where mentalization is most often lost, and (5) introducing a ten-minute “reflection time” in the classroom at the end of each day, dedicated to a conversation, from a mentalizing perspective, about important events that happened during the day and any situations of violence that occurred (Twemlow et al., 2017). Practical mentalization exercises can be illustrated by the “Projective Picture Exercise” for teachers, which uses projective stimuli in the form of drawn ambiguous scenarios of social interactions. The exercise involves writing a story about the actions and emotions of the characters in an ambiguous illustrated scene. The aim of the exercise is to elicit a range of emotional responses from participants that reveal their own ways of mentalizing relationships and relationship interactions. The aim is not only to practise one’s own mentalization, but also to share in a group and to listen to the different reactions of their colleagues. The teachers gain an understanding of the different perspectives that a single scenario can evoke. They are also challenged to reflect on where their own stories come from. This encourages a new understanding of mentalization

and the role of the unconscious in relation to conscious assumptions and perspectives, which is usually a very profound experience for the participants (Fonagy et al., 2005, 2009).

The CAPSLE programme, applied longitudinally to children aged from eight to 11 years, led to a significant reduction in the incidence of aggressive acts, increased empathy, and reduced feelings of victimisation. After the programme, teachers observed an increase in the frequency of friendly and helpful behaviour among the children, instead of aggressive, power, and humiliating interactions, even among the main perpetrators of bullying (e.g. a student who willingly tied a first grader’s shoelace). The authors now believe that the main difference between a violent and peaceful school community lies in the extent to which implicit social norms are structured to encourage all the participants to be aware of each other’s mental states (Twemlow et al., 2017). In addition, students’ academic performance increased significantly within one to two years in schools that implemented similar programmes (Twemlow et al., 2005a, 2005b, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This theoretical article has analysed mentalization as a basic psychological function that serves to understand our own and other people’s behaviour, or imagination about the



mind. This function is the foundation of all other social and personal skills. In ontogenesis, mentalization develops through sensitive mirroring and trust in the context of early attachment relationships (Bateman & Fonagy, 2019). In severe cases of neglect or maltreatment, adaptive suppression or “shutting down” of mentalization may occur in response to a threatening early attachment experience. In the long run, however, this strategy is actually harmful, because it prevents effective social learning and creates an epistemic disadvantage that has serious consequences for the child’s education (Hanson et al., 2017). It is important for teachers to understand these connections, to understand why the same educational practices that have worked with securely attached children may not work with children who have a problematic attachment style. Establishing and maintaining epistemic trust and thus enabling knowledge transfer among students with adverse relational experiences is not an easy task. A mentalizing teacher is effective, because he or she is able to mentalize a student well enough that the student feels understood and seen. This leads to the student’s epistemic trust that the teacher is a source of important and trustworthy knowledge. With epistemic trust, students focus more on what is taught, remember it better, and try to apply what they have learned in other contexts (Asen & Fonagy, 2021; Hattie, 2009).

Recent challenging events that cause stress and emotional problems can undermine students’ academic performance by impairing their cognitive functions, such as working memory, and reducing their engagement, perseverance, and participation in learning (Moilanen, 2010). Mentalization appears to be crucial in tolerating and coping with unregulated emotional states. Specific mentalization skills can help teachers to regulate themselves emotionally and behaviourally during difficult interactions with children, which in the long term can also help to regulate children (Asen & Fonagy, 2021). A teacher with developed mentalizing skills will not jump to conclusions about students’ negative behaviours, nor assume that students have negative intentions behind these behaviours, and as a result may be more likely to interact supportively with students, express positive and kind emotions towards them, and avoid harsh, negative, or exaggerated reactions to students’ negative behaviours (Fonagy et al., 2005, 2009). Therefore, the main aim of mentalization-based programmes for teachers is to practise mentalization skills such as curiosity about the mental states of others and oneself, understanding how emotions and mental states can be opaque (healthy uncertainty about others’ minds), being able to take different perspectives in relationships, and understanding how one’s own mental states and actions



affect others (Asen & Fonagy, 2021). The successful implementation of these programmes has shown how an easy-to-implement school intervention focused on mentalization can reduce aggressive thoughts and behaviours, improve the classroom climate, and increase achievement (Fonagy et al., 2009, Adkins et al., 2018).

The purpose of this study was to provide teachers with a comprehensive theoretical framework of mentalization in its developmental contexts and to support them in recognising the importance of maintaining and de-

veloping their own mentalizing skills. These skills enable teachers to help students reflect on their own mentalizing skills and create an environment of epistemic trust in the classroom, ultimately leading to more effective learning. Teachers with well-developed mentalization are better able to tune into their students' mental states, respond sensitively to their needs, and create a nurturing and inclusive learning environment. Knowing that mentalizing can be continuously cultivated and trained is also important for teachers.

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NIŠPONSKÁ, M. Mentalizace a možnosti jejího využití ve školách

V článku je nastíněn současný stav teoretických poznatků o metalizaci, která se jeví být nepostradatelnou pro efektivní působení v učitelské profesi. Mentalizace je funkcí, díky níž jedinec dokáže chápat a interpretovat vlastní chování i chování druhých lidí jako smysluplné, na základě vnímání záměrných mentálních stavů – potřeb, myšlenek, pocitů, přesvědčení a zdůvodnění. Jde o porozumění pozadí chování – tedy chápání mentálních stavů, které jedince vedly k určitému chování. Díky teorii mentalizace dnes dokážeme lépe a detailněji uvažovat a diskutovat o tom, co



se děje mezi lidmi a v lidech, když spolu komunikují v rozmanitých sociálních kontextech, např. ve školním prostředí. Tyto dovednosti jsou pro učitele velmi přínosné, protože pracují s dětmi, jejichž mentalizační schopnosti se teprve zakládají. Zároveň se ve své praxi často setkávají i s dětmi, které přicházejí do školy s problémovým chováním, narušenou vztahovou vazbou a negativními vnitřními pracovními modely vztahů, což komplikuje rozvoj mentalizačních schopností. V tomto článku se budeme blíže zabývat tím, jak může být mentalizace prospěšná pro učitele a žáky a jak ji mohou učitelé využívat ve své práci. Článek zdůrazňuje význam mentalizace a vytváří rámec pro psychologické intervence ve školách zaměřené na zvýšení mentalizace učitelů, rodičů a žáků. Programy na podporu mentalizace ve školách mají prokazatelné výsledky na zvyšování resilience učitelů, na snižování projevu agrese a zlepšení akademického výkonu u žáků.

Klíčová slova: *mentalizace, epistemická důvěra, duševní zdraví, vztahová vazba, zdravá škola*